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FROMONT AND RISLER

ALPHONSE DAUDET

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Alphonse Daudet.

[*From a Photograph.*]

NEW YORK

1910

FROMONT AND RISLER

By ALPHONSE DAUDET

Crowned by the French Academy

With a Preface by LE-
CONTE DE LISLE
of the French Academy

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ALPHONSE DAUDET

NOMINALLY, Daudet, with the Goncourts and Zola, formed a trio representing Naturalism in fiction. He adopted the watchwords of that school, and by private friendship, no less than by a common profession of faith, was one of them. But the students of the future, while recognizing an obvious affinity between the other two, may be puzzled to find Daudet's name conjoined with theirs.

Decidedly, Daudet belonged to the Realistic School. But, above all, he was an Impressionist. All that can be observed—the individual picture, scene, character—Daudet will render with wonderful accuracy, and all his novels, especially those written after 1870, show an increasing firmness of touch, limpidity of style, and wise simplicity in the use of the sources of pathetic emotion, such as befit the cautious Naturalist. Daudet wrote stories, but he had to be listened to. Feverish as his method of writing was—true to his Southern character—he took endless pains to write well, revising every manuscript three times over from beginning to end. He wrote from the very midst of the human comedy; and it is from this that he seems at times to have caught the bodily warmth and the taste of the tears and the

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very ring of the laughter of men and women. In the earlier novels, perhaps, the transitions from episode to episode or from scene to scene are often abrupt, suggesting the manner of the Goncourts. But to Zola he forms an instructive contrast, of the same school, but not of the same family. Zola is methodical, Daudet spontaneous. Zola works with documents, Daudet from the living fact. Zola is objective, Daudet with equal scope and fearlessness shows more personal feeling and hence more delicacy. And in style also Zola is vast, architectural; Daudet slight, rapid, subtle, lively, suggestive. And finally, in their philosophy of life, Zola may inspire a hate of vice and wrong, but Daudet wins a love for what is good and true.

Alphonse Daudet was born in Nîmes, Provence, May 13, 1840. His father had been a well-to-do silk manufacturer, but, while Alphonse was still a child, lost his property. Poverty compelled the son to seek the wretched post of usher (*pion*) in a school at Alais. In November, 1857, he settled in Paris and joined his almost equally penniless brother Ernest. The autobiography, *Le Petit Chose* (1868), gives graphic details about this period. His first years of literary life were those of an industrious Bohemian, with poetry for consolation and newspaper work for bread. He had secured a secretaryship with the Duc de Morny, President of the Corps Législatif, and had won recognition for his short stories in the *Figaro*, when failing health compelled him to go to Algiers. Returning, he married toward that period a lady (Julia Allard, born 1847), whose literary talent comprehended, supplemented,

and aided his own. After the death of the Duc de Morny (1865) he consecrated himself entirely to literature and published *Lettres de mon Moulin* (1868), which also made his name favorably known. He now turned from fiction to the drama, and it was not until after 1870 that he became fully conscious of his vocation as a novelist, perhaps through the trials of the siege of Paris and the humiliation of his country, which deepened his nature without souring it. Daudet's genial satire, *Tartarin de Tarascon*, appeared in 1872; but with the Parisian romance *Fromont jeune et Risler aîné*, crowned by the Academy (1874), he suddenly advanced into the foremost rank of French novelists; it was his first great success, or, as he puts it, "the dawn of his popularity."

How numberless editions of this book were printed, and rights of translations sought from other countries, Daudet has told us with natural pride. The book must be read to be appreciated. "Risler, a self-made, honest man, raises himself socially into a society against the corruptness of which he has no defence and from which he escapes only by suicide. Sidonie Chèbe is a peculiarly French type, a vain and heartless woman; Delobelle, the actor, a delectable figure; the domestic simplicity of Desirée Delobelle and her mother quite refreshing."

Success followed now after success. *Jack* (1876); *Le Nabab* (1877); *Les Rois en éxil* (1879); *Numa Roumestan* (1882); *L'Evangeliste* (1883); *Sapho* (1884); *Tartarin sur des Alpes* (1886); *L'Immortel* (1888); *Port Tarascon* (1890); *Rose et Ninette* (1892); *La*

petite Parvisse (1895); and *Soutien de Famille* (1899); such is the long list of the great life-artist. In *Le Nabab* we find obvious traces of Daudet's visits to Algiers and Corsica—Mora is the Duc de Morny. *Sapho* is the most concentrated of his novels, with never a divergence, never a break, in its development. And of the theme—legitimate marriage *contra* common-law—what need be said except that he handled it in a manner most acceptable to the æsthetic and least offensive to the moral sense?

L'Immortel is a satire springing from personal reasons; *L'Evangeliste* and *Rose et Ninette*—the latter on the divorce problem—may be classed as clever novels; but had Daudet never written more than *Fromont et Risler*, *Tartarin sur les Alpes*, and *Port Tarascon*, these would keep him in lasting remembrance.

We must not omit to mention also many *contes* and his *Trente ans de Paris* (*A travers ma vie et mes livres*), *Souvenirs d'un Homme de lettres* (1888), and *Notes sur la Vie* (1899).

The dramas of Daudet are: *La dernière Idole* (1862); *Les Absents* (1864); *L'Oeillet blanc* (1865); *Le Frère aîné* (1867); *Le Sacrifice* (1869); *L'Arlésienne* (1872); *Lise Tavernier* (1872); *Le Char* (1878); and *L'Obstacle* (1890). He also assisted in dramatizing most of his novels.

Alphonse Daudet died in Paris, December 16, 1897.

Vicomte de Vogüé

dé l'Académie Française.

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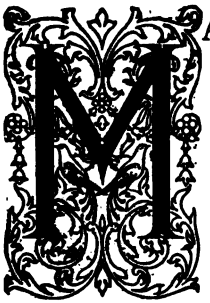
FROMONT AND RISLER

CHAPTER I

A WEDDING-PARTY AT THE CAFÉ VÉFOUR



ADAME CHÈBE!"

"My boy——"

"I am so happy!"

This was the twentieth time that day that the good Risler had said that he was happy, and always with the same emotional and contented manner, in the same low, deep voice—the voice that is held in check by emotion and does not speak too loud for fear of suddenly breaking into violent tears.

Not for the world would Risler have wept at that moment—imagine a newly-made husband giving way to tears in the midst of the wedding-festival! And yet he had a strong inclination to do so. His happiness stifled him, held him by the throat, prevented the words from coming forth. All that he could do was to murmur from time to time, with a slight trembling of the lips, "I am happy; I am happy!"

Indeed, he had reason to be happy.

Since early morning the poor man had fancied that

he was being whirled along in one of those magnificent dreams from which one fears lest he may awake suddenly with blinded eyes; but it seemed to him as if this dream would never end. It had begun at five o'clock in the morning, and at ten o'clock at night, exactly ten o'clock by Véfour's clock, he was still dreaming.

How many things had happened during that day, and how vividly he remembered the most trivial details.

He saw himself, at daybreak, striding up and down his bachelor quarters, delight mingled with impatience, clean-shaven, his coat on, and two pairs of white gloves in his pocket. Then there were the wedding-coaches, and in the foremost one—the one with white horses, white reins, and a yellow damask lining—the bride, in her finery, floated by like a cloud. Then the procession into the church, two by two, the white veil in advance, ethereal, and dazzling to behold. The organ, the verger, the curé's sermon, the tapers casting their light upon jewels and spring gowns, and the throng of people in the sacristy, the tiny white cloud swallowed up, surrounded, embraced, while the bridegroom distributed hand-shakes among all the leading tradesmen of Paris, who had assembled to do him honor. And the grand crash from the organ at the close, made more solemn by the fact that the church door was thrown wide open, so that the whole street took part in the family ceremony—the music passing through the vestibule at the same time with the procession—the exclamations of the crowd, and a burnisher in an ample lute-

string apron remarking in a loud voice, "The groom isn't handsome, but the bride's as pretty as a picture." That is the kind of thing that makes you proud when you happen to be the bridegroom.

And then the breakfast at the factory, in a workroom adorned with hangings and flowers; the drive in the Bois—a concession to the wishes of his mother-in-law, Madame Chèbe, who, being the petty Parisian *bourgeoise* that she was, would not have deemed her daughter legally married without a drive around the lake and a visit to the Cascade. Then the return for dinner, as the lamps were being lighted along the boulevard, where people turned to look after the wedding-party, a typical well-to-do *bourgeois* wedding-party, as it drove up to the grand entrance at Véfour's with all the style the livery horses could command.

Risler had reached that point in his dream.

And now the worthy man, dazed with fatigue and well-being, glanced vaguely about that huge table of twenty-four covers, curved in the shape of a horseshoe at the ends, and surrounded by smiling, familiar faces, wherein he seemed to see his happiness reflected in every eye. The dinner was drawing near its close. The wave of private conversation flowed around the table. Faces were turned toward one another, black sleeves stole behind waists adorned with bunches of asclepias, a childish face laughed over a fruit ice, and the dessert at the level of the guests' lips encompassed the cloth with animation, bright colors, and light.

Ah, yes! Risler was very happy.

Except his brother Frantz, everybody he loved was

there. First of all, sitting opposite him, was Sidonie—yesterday little Sidonie, to-day his wife. For the ceremony of dinner she had laid aside her veil; she had emerged from her cloud. Now, above the smooth, white silk gown, appeared a pretty face of a less lustrous and softer white, and the crown of hair—beneath that other crown so carefully bestowed—would have told you of a tendency to rebel against life, of little feathers fluttering for an opportunity to fly away. But husbands do not see such things as those.

Next to Sidonie and Frantz, the person whom Risler loved best in the world was Madame Georges Fromont, whom he called "Madame Chorche," the wife of his partner and the daughter of the late Fromont, his former employer and his god. He had placed her beside him, and in his manner of speaking to her one could read affection and deference. She was a very young woman, of about the same age as Sidonie, but of a more regular, quiet and placid type of beauty. She talked little, being out of her element in that conglomerate assemblage; but she tried to appear affable.

On Risler's other side sat Madame Chèbe, the bride's mother, radiant and gorgeous in her green satin gown, which gleamed like a shield. Ever since the morning the good woman's every thought had been as brilliant as that robe of emblematic hue. At every moment she said to herself: "My daughter is marrying Fromont Jeune and Risler Aîné, of Rue des Vieilles-Haudriettes!" For, in her mind, it was not Risler alone whom her daughter took for her husband, but the

whole sign of the establishment, illustrious in the commercial annals of Paris; and whenever she mentally announced that glorious event, Madame Chèbe sat more erect than ever, stretching the silk of the bodice until it almost cracked.

What a contrast to the attitude of Monsieur Chèbe, who was seated at a short distance. In different households, as a general rule, the same causes produce altogether different results. That little man, with the high forehead of a visionary, as inflated and hollow as a ball, was as fierce in appearance as his wife was radiant. That was nothing unusual, by the way, for Monsieur Chèbe was in a frenzy the whole year long. On this particular evening, however, he did not wear his customary woe-begone, lack-lustre expression, nor the full-skirted coat, with the pockets sticking out behind, filled to repletion with samples of oil, wine, truffles, or vinegar, according as he happened to be dealing in one or the other of those articles. His black coat, new and magnificent, made a fitting pendant to the green gown; but unfortunately his thoughts were of the color of his coat. Why had they not seated him beside the bride, as was his right? Why had they given his seat to young Fromont? And there was old Gardinois, the Fromonts' grandfather, what business had he by Sidonie's side? Ah! that was how it was to be! Everything for the Fromonts and nothing for the Chèbes! And yet people are amazed that there are such things as revolutions!

Luckily the little man had by his side, to vent his anger upon, his friend Delobelle, an old, retired actor,

who listened to him with his serene and majestic holiday countenance.

Strangely enough, the bride herself had something of that same expression. On that pretty and youthful face, which happiness enlivened without making glad, appeared indications of some secret preoccupation; and, at times, the corners of her lips quivered with a smile, as if she were talking to herself.

With that same little smile she replied to the somewhat pronounced pleasantries of Grandfather Gardinois, who sat by her side.

"This Sidonie, on my word!" said the good man, with a laugh. "When I think that not two months ago she was talking about going into a convent. We all know what sort of convents such minxes as she go to! As the saying is in our province: *The Convent of Saint Joseph, four shoes under the bed!*"

And everybody at the table laughed heartily at the rustic jests of the old Berrichon peasant, whose colossal fortune filled the place of manliness, of education, of kindness of heart, but not of wit; for he had plenty of that, the rascal—more than all his *bourgeois* fellow-guests together. Among the very rare persons who inspired a sympathetic feeling in his breast, little Chèbe, whom he had known as an urchin, appealed paticularly to him; and she, for her part, having become rich too recently not to venerate wealth, talked to her right-hand neighbor with a very perceptible air of respect and coquetry.

With her left-hand neighbor, on the contrary, Georges Fromont, her husband's partner, she exhibited

the utmost reserve. Their conversation was restricted to the ordinary courtesies of the table; indeed there was a sort of affectation of indifference between them.

Suddenly there was that little commotion among the guests which indicates that they are about to rise: the rustling of silk, the moving of chairs, the last words of conversations, the completion of a laugh, and in that half-silence Madame Chèbe, who had become communicative, observed in a very loud tone to a provincial cousin, who was gazing in an ecstasy of admiration at the newly made bride's reserved and tranquil demeanor, as she stood with her arm in Monsieur Gardinois's:

"You see that child, cousin—well, no one has ever been able to find out what her thoughts were."

Thereupon the whole party rose and repaired to the grand salon.

While the guests invited for the ball were arriving and mingling with the dinner-guests, while the orchestra was tuning up, while the cavaliers, eyeglass in position, strutted before the impatient, white-gowned damsels, the bridegroom, awed by so great a throng, had taken refuge with his friend Planus—Sigismond Planus, cashier of the house of Fromont for thirty years—in that little gallery decorated with flowers and hung with a paper representing shrubbery and clambering vines, which forms a sort of background of artificial verdure to Véfour's gilded salons.

"Sigismond, old friend—I am very happy."

And Sigismond too was happy; but Risler did not give him time to say so. Now that he was no longer

in dread of weeping before his guests, all the joy in his heart overflowed.

"Just think of it, my friend!—It's so extraordinary that a young girl like Sidonie would consent to marry me. For you know I'm not handsome. I didn't need to have that impudent creature tell me so this morning to know it. And then I'm forty-two—and she such a dear little thing! There were so many others she might have chosen, among the youngest and the richest, to say nothing of my poor Frantz, who loved her so. But, no, she preferred her old Risler. And it came about so strangely. For a long time I noticed that she was sad, greatly changed. I felt sure there was some disappointment in love at the bottom of it. Her mother and I looked about, and we cudgelled our brains to find out what it could be. One morning Madame Chèbe came into my room weeping, and said, "You are the man she loves, my dear friend!" —And I was the man—I was the man! Bless my soul! Whoever would have suspected such a thing? And to think that in the same year I had those two great pieces of good fortune—a partnership in the house of Fromont and married to Sidonie—Oh!"

At that moment, to the strains of a giddy, languishing waltz, a couple whirled into the small salon. They were Risler's bride and his partner, Georges Fromont. Equally young and attractive, they were talking in undertones, confining their words within the narrow circle of the waltz.

"You lie!" said Sidonie, slightly pale, but with the same little smile.

And the other, paler than she, replied:

"I do not lie. It was my uncle who insisted upon this marriage. He was dying—you had gone away. I dared not say no."

Risler, at a distance, gazed at them in admiration.

"How pretty she is! How well they dance!"

But, when they spied him, the dancers separated, and Sidonie walked quickly to him.

"What! You here? What are you doing? They are looking everywhere for you. Why aren't you in there?"

As she spoke she retied his cravat with a pretty, impatient gesture. That enchanted Risler, who smiled at Sigismond from the corner of his eye, too overjoyed at feeling the touch of that little gloved hand on his neck, to notice that she was trembling to the ends of her slender fingers.

"Give me your arm," she said to him, and they returned together to the salons. The white bridal gown with its long train made the badly cut, awkwardly worn black coat appear even more uncouth; but a coat can not be retied like a cravat; she must needs take it as it was. As they passed along, returning the salutations of all the guests who were so eager to smile upon them, Sidonie had a momentary thrill of pride, of satisfied vanity. Unhappily it did not last. In a corner of the room sat a young and attractive woman whom nobody invited to dance, but who looked on at the dances with a placid eye, illumined by all the joy of a first maternity. As soon as he saw her, Risler walked straight to the corner where she sat and compelled Sidonie to sit beside

her. Needless to say that it was Madame "Chorche." To whom else would he have spoken with such affectionate respect? In what other hand than hers could he have placed his little Sidonie's, saying: "You will love her dearly, won't you? You are so good. She needs your advice, your knowledge of the world."

"Why, my dear Risler," Madame Georges replied, "Sidonie and I are old friends. We have reason to be fond of each other still."

And her calm, straightforward glance strove unsuccessfully to meet that of her old friend.

With his ignorance of women, and his habit of treating Sidonie as a child, Risler continued in the same tone:

"Take her for your model, little one. There are not two people in the world like Madame Chorche. She has her poor father's heart. A true Fromont!"

Sidonie, with her eyes cast down, bowed without replying, while an imperceptible shudder ran from the tip of her satin shoe to the topmost bit of orange-blossom in her crown. But honest Risler saw nothing. The excitement, the dancing, the music, the flowers, the lights made him drunk, made him mad. He believed that every one breathed the same atmosphere of bliss beyond compare which enveloped him. He had no perception of the rivalries, the petty hatreds that met and passed one another above all those bejewelled foreheads.

He did not notice Delobelle, standing with his elbow on the mantel, one hand in the armhole of his waistcoat and his hat upon his hip, weary of his eternal

attitudinizing, while the hours slipped by and no one thought of utilizing his talents. He did not notice M. Chèbe, who was prowling darkly between the two doors, more incensed than ever against the Fromonts. Oh! those Fromonts!—How large a place they filled at that wedding! They were all there with their wives, their children, their friends, their friends' friends. One would have said that one of themselves was being married. Who had a word to say of the Rislers or the Chèbes? Why, he—he, the father, had not even been presented!—And the little man's rage was redoubled by the attitude of Madame Chèbe, smiling maternally upon one and all in her scarab-hued dress.

Furthermore, there were at this, as at almost all wedding-parties, two distinct currents which came together but without mingling. One of the two soon gave place to the other. The Fromonts, who irritated Monsieur Chèbe so much and who formed the aristocracy of the ball, the president of the Chamber of Commerce, the syndic of the solicitors, a famous chocolate-manufacturer and member of the Corps Législatif, and the old millionaire Gardinois, all retired shortly after midnight. Georges Fromont and his wife entered their carriage behind them. Only the Risler and Chèbe party remained, and the festivity at once changed its aspect, becoming more uproarious.

The illustrious Delobelle, disgusted to see that no one called upon him for anything, decided to call upon himself for something, and began in a voice as resonant as a gong the monologue from *Ruy Blas*: "Good appetite, Messieurs!"—while the guests thronged to the

buffet, spread with chocolate and glasses of punch. Inexpensive little costumes were displayed upon the benches, overjoyed to produce their due effect at last; and here and there divers young shop-clerks, consumed with conceit, amused themselves by venturing upon a quadrille.

The bride had long wished to take her leave. At last she disappeared with Risler and Madame Chèbe. As for Monsieur Chèbe, who had recovered all his importance, it was impossible to induce him to go. Some one must be there to do the honors, deuce take it! And I assure you that the little man assumed the responsibility! He was flushed, lively, frolicsome, noisy, almost seditious. On the floor below he could be heard talking politics with Véfour's head-waiter, and making most audacious statements.

Through the deserted streets the wedding-carriage, the tired coachman holding the white reins somewhat loosely, rolled heavily toward the Marais.

Madame Chèbe talked continuously, enumerating all the splendors of that memorable day, rhapsodizing especially over the dinner, the commonplace *menu* of which had been to her the highest display of magnificence. Sidonie mused in the darkness of the carriage, and Risler, sitting opposite her, even though he no longer said, "I am very happy," continued to think it with all his heart. Once he tried to take possession of a little white hand that rested against the closed window, but it was hastily withdrawn, and he sat there without moving, lost in mute admiration.

They drove through the Halles and the Rue de

Rambuteau, thronged with kitchen-gardeners' wagons; and, near the end of the Rue des Francs-Bourgeois, they turned the corner of the Archives into the Rue de Braque. There they stopped first, and Madame Chèbe alighted at her door, which was too narrow for the magnificent green silk frock, so that it vanished in the hall with rustlings of revolt and with all its folds muttering. A few minutes later, a tall, massive portal on the Rue des Vieilles-Haudriettes, bearing on the escutcheon that betrayed the former family mansion, beneath half-effaced armorial bearings, a sign in blue letters, *Wall Papers*, was thrown wide open to allow the wedding-carriage to pass through.

Thereupon the bride, hitherto motionless and like one asleep, seemed to wake suddenly, and if all the lights in the vast buildings, workshops or storehouses, which surrounded the courtyard, had not been extinguished, Risler might have seen that pretty, enigmatical face suddenly lighted by a smile of triumph. The wheels revolved less noisily on the fine gravel of a garden, and soon stopped before the stoop of a small house of two floors. It was there that the young Fromonts lived, and Risler and his wife were to take up their abode on the floor above. The house had an aristocratic air. Flourishing commerce avenged itself therein for the dismal street and the out-of-the-way quarter. There was a carpet on the stairway leading to their apartment, and on all sides shone the gleaming whiteness of marble, the reflection of mirrors and of polished copper.

While Risler was parading his delight through all

the rooms of the new apartment, Sidonie remained alone in her bedroom. By the light of the little blue lamp hanging from the ceiling, she glanced first of all at the mirror, which gave back her reflection from head to foot, at all her luxurious surroundings, so unfamiliar to her; then, instead of going to bed, she opened the window and stood leaning against the sill, motionless as a statue.

The night was clear and warm. She could see distinctly the whole factory, its innumerable unshaded windows, its glistening panes, its tall chimney losing itself in the depths of the sky, and nearer at hand the lovely little garden against the ancient wall of the former mansion. All about were gloomy, miserable roofs and squalid streets. Suddenly she started. Yonder, in the darkest, the ugliest of all those attics crowding so closely together, leaning against one another, as if overweighted with misery, a fifth-floor window stood wide open, showing only darkness within. She recognized it at once. It was the window of the landing on which her parents lived.

The window on the landing!

How many things the mere name recalled! How many hours, how many days she had passed there, leaning on that damp sill, without rail or balcony, looking toward the factory. At that moment she fancied that she could see up yonder little Chèbe's ragged person, and in the frame made by that poor window, her whole child life, her deplorable youth as a Parisian street arab, passed before her eyes.

CHAPTER II

LITTLE CHÈBE'S STORY

IN Paris the common landing is like an additional room, an enlargement of their abodes, to poor families confined in their too small apartments. They go there to get a breath of air in summer, and there the women talk and the children play.

When little Chèbe made too much noise in the house, her mother would say to her: "There there! you bother me, go and play on the landing." And the child would go quickly enough.

This landing, on the upper floor of an old house in which space had not been spared, formed a sort of large lobby, with a high ceiling, guarded on the staircase side by a wrought-iron rail, lighted by a large window which looked out upon roofs, courtyards, and other windows, and, farther away, upon the garden of the Fromont factory, which was like a green oasis among the huge old walls.

There was nothing very cheerful about it, but the child liked it much better than her own home. Their rooms were dismal, especially when it rained and Ferdinand did not go out.

With his brain always smoking with new ideas,

which unfortunately never came to anything, Ferdinand Chèbe was one of those slothful, project-devising *bourgeois* of whom there are so many in Paris. His wife, whom he had dazzled at first, had soon detected his utter insignificance, and had ended by enduring patiently and with unchanged demeanor his continual dreams of wealth and the disasters that immediately followed them.

Of the *dot* of eighty thousand francs which she had brought him, and which he had squandered in his absurd schemes, only a small annuity remained, which still gave them a position of some importance in the eyes of their neighbors, as did Madame Chèbe's cashmere, which had been rescued from every wreck, her wedding laces and two diamond studs, very tiny and very modest, which Sidonie sometimes begged her mother to show her, as they lay in the drawer of the bureau, in an old-fashioned white velvet case, on which the jeweller's name, in gilt letters, thirty years old, was gradually fading. That was the only bit of luxury in that poor annuitant's abode.

For a very long time M. Chèbe had sought a place which would enable him to eke out their slender income. But he sought it only in what he called *standing business*, his health forbidding any occupation that required him to be seated.

It seemed that, soon after his marriage, when he was in a flourishing business and had a horse and tilbury of his own, the little man had had one day a serious fall. That fall, to which he referred upon every occasion, served as an excuse for his indolence.

One could not be with M. Chèbe five minutes before he would say in a confidential one:

"You know of the accident that happened to the Duc d'Orléans?"

And then he would add, tapping his little bald pate: "The same thing happened to me in my youth."

Since that famous fall any sort of office work made him dizzy, and he had found himself inexorably confined to *standing business*. Thus, he had been in turn a broker in wines, in books, in truffles, in clocks, and in many other things beside. Unluckily, he tired of everything, never considered his position sufficiently exalted for a former business man with a tilbury, and, by gradual degrees, by dint of deeming every sort of occupation beneath him, he had grown old and incapable, a genuine idler with low tastes, a good-for-nothing.

Artists are often rebuked for their oddities, for the liberties they take with nature, for that horror of the conventional which impels them to follow by-paths; but who can ever describe all the absurd fancies, all the idiotic eccentricities with which a *bourgeois* without occupation can succeed in filling the emptiness of his life? M. Chèbe imposed upon himself certain rules concerning his goings and comings, and his walks abroad. While the Boulevard Sebastopol was being built, he went twice a day "to see how it was getting on."

No one knew better than he the fashionable shops and the bargains; and very often Madame Chèbe, annoyed to see her husband's idiotic face at the window while she was energetically mending the family linen,

would rid herself of him by giving him an errand to do. "You know that place, on the corner of such a street, where they sell such nice cakes. They would be nice for our dessert."

And the husband would go out, saunter along the boulevard by the shops, wait for the omnibus, and pass half the day in procuring two cakes, worth three sous, which he would bring home in triumph, wiping his forehead.

M. Chèbe adored the summer, the Sundays, the great foot-races in the dust at Clamart or Romainville, the excitement of holidays and the crowd. He was one of those who went about for a whole week before the fifteenth of August, gazing at the black lamps and their frames, and the scaffoldings. Nor did his wife complain. At all events, she no longer had that chronic grumbler prowling around her chair for whole days, with schemes for gigantic enterprises, combinations that missed fire in advance, lamentations concerning the past, and a fixed determination not to work at anything to earn money.

She no longer earned anything herself, poor woman; but she knew so well how to save, her wonderful economy made up so completely for everything else, that absolute want, although a near neighbor of such impecuniosity as theirs, never succeeded in making its way into those three rooms, which were always neat and clean, or in destroying the carefully mended garments or the old furniture so well concealed beneath its coverings.

Opposite the Chèbes' door, whose copper knob

gleamed in *bourgeois* fashion upon the landing, were two other and smaller ones.

On the first, a visiting-card, held in place by four nails, according to the custom in vogue among industrial artists, bore the name of

RISLER
DESIGNER OF PATTERNS.

On the other was a small square of leather, with these words in gilt letters:

MESDAMES DELOBELLE
BIRDS AND INSECTS FOR ORNAMENT.

The Delobelles' door was often open, disclosing a large room with a brick floor, where two women, mother and daughter, the latter almost a child, each as weary and as pale as the other, worked at one of the thousand fanciful little trades which go to make up what is called the *Articles de Paris*.

It was then the fashion to ornament hats and ball-gowns with the lovely little insects from South America that have the brilliant coloring of jewels and reflect the light like diamonds. The Delobelles had adopted that specialty.

A wholesale house, to which consignments were made directly from the Antilles, sent to them, unopened, long, light boxes from which, when the lid was removed, arose a faint odor, a dust of arsenic through which gleamed the piles of insects, impaled before being shipped, the birds packed closely together, their wings held in place by a strip of thin paper. They must all

be mounted—the insects quivering upon brass wire, the humming-birds with their feathers ruffled;—they must be cleansed and polished, the break in a bright-red claw repaired with a silk thread, dead eyes replaced with sparkling pearls, and the insect or the bird restored to an appearance of life and grace.

The mother prepared the work under her daughter's direction; for Désirée, though she was still a mere girl, was endowed with exquisite taste, with a fairy-like power of invention, and no one could insert two pearl eyes in those tiny heads or spread their lifeless wings so deftly as she.

Happy or unhappy, Désirée always worked with the same energy. From dawn until well into the night the table was covered with work. At the last ray of daylight, when the factory bells were ringing in all the neighboring yards, Madame Delobelle lighted the lamp, and after a more than frugal repast they returned to their work.

Those two indefatigable women had one object, one fixed idea, which prevented them from feeling the burden of enforced vigils. That idea was the dramatic renown of the illustrious Delobelle.

After he had left the provincial theatres to pursue his profession in Paris, Delobelle waited for an intelligent manager, the ideal and providential manager who discovers geniuses, to seek him out and offer him a *rôle* suited to his talents. He might, perhaps, especially at the beginning, have obtained a passably good engagement at a theatre of the third order, but Delobelle did not choose to lower himself.

He preferred to wait, to struggle, as he said! And this is how he awaited the struggle.

In the morning in his bedroom, often in his bed, he rehearsed *rôles* in his former repertory; and the Delobelle ladies trembled with emotion when they heard behind the partition tirades from *Antony* or the *Médecin des Enfants*, declaimed in a sonorous voice that blended with the thousand-and-one noises of the great Parisian bee-hive. Then, after breakfast, the actor would sally forth for the day; would go to "do his boulevard," that is to say, to saunter to and fro between the Château d'Eau and the Madeline, with a toothpick in the corner of his mouth, his hat a little on one side—always gloved, and brushed, and glossy.

That question of dress was of great importance in his eyes. It was one of the greatest elements of success, a bait for the manager—the famous, intelligent manager—who never would dream of engaging a threadbare, shabbily dressed man.

So the Delobelle ladies took good care that he lacked nothing; and you can imagine how many birds and insects it required to fit out a blade of that temper! The actor thought it the most natural thing in the world.

In his view, the labors, the privations of his wife and daughter were not, strictly speaking, for his benefit, but for the benefit of that mysterious and unknown genius, whose trustee he considered himself to be.

There was a certain analogy between the position of the Chèbe family and that of the Delobelles. But the latter household was less depressing. The Chèbes felt

that their petty annuitant existence was fastened upon them forever, with no prospect of amelioration, always the same; whereas, in the actor's family, hope and illusion often opened magnificent vistas.

The Chèbes were like people living in a blind alley; the Delobelles on a foul little street, where there was no light or air, but where a great boulevard might some day be laid out. And then, too, Madame Chèbe no longer believed in her husband, whereas, by virtue of that single magic word, "Art!" her neighbor never had doubted hers.

And yet for years and years Monsieur Delobelle had been unavailingly drinking vermouth with dramatic agents, absinthe with leaders of claques, bitters with vaudevillists, dramatists, and the famous what's-his-name, author of several great dramas. Engagements did not always follow. So that, without once appearing on the boards, the poor man had progressed from *jeune premier* to *grand premier rôles*, then to the financiers, then to the noble fathers, then to the buffoons—

He stopped there!

On two or three occasions his friends had obtained for him a chance to earn his living as manager of a club or a café, as an inspector in great warehouses, at the *Phares de la Bastille* or the *Colosse de Rhodes*. All that was necessary was to have good manners. Delobelle was not lacking in that respect, God knows! And yet every suggestion that was made to him the great man met with a heroic refusal.

"I have no right to abandon the stage!" he would then assert.

In the mouth of that poor devil, who had not set foot on the boards for years, it was irresistibly comical. But one lost the inclination to laugh when one saw his wife and his daughter swallowing particles of arsenic day and night, and heard them repeat emphatically as they broke their needles against the brass wire with which the little birds were mounted:

"No! no! Monsieur Delobelle has no right to abandon the stage."

Happy man, whose bulging eyes, always smiling condescendingly, and whose habit of reigning on the stage had procured for him for life that exceptional position of a spoiled and admired child-king! When he left the house, the shopkeepers on the Rue des Francs-Bourgeois, with the predilection of the Parisian for everything and everybody connected with the theatre, saluted him respectfully. He was always so well dressed! And then he was so kind, so obliging! When you think that every Saturday night, he, Ruy Blas, Antony, Raphael in the *Filles de Marbre*, Andrès in the *Pirates de la Savane*, sallied forth, with a bandbox under his arm, to carry the week's work of his wife and daughter to a flower establishment on the Rue St.-Denis!

Why, even when performing such a commission as that, this devil of a fellow had such nobility of bearing, such native dignity, that the young woman whose duty it was to make up the Delobelle account was sorely embarrassed to hand to such an irreproachable gentleman the paltry stipend so laboriously earned.

On those evenings, by the way, the actor did not return home to dinner. The women were forewarned.

He always met some old comrade on the boulevard, some unlucky devil like himself—there are so many of them in that sacred profession!—whom he entertained at a restaurant or café. Then, with scrupulous fidelity —and very grateful they were to him—he would carry the rest of the money home, sometimes with a bouquet for his wife or a little present for Désirée, a nothing, a mere trifle. What would you have? Those are the customs of the stage. It is such a simple matter in a melodrama to toss a handful of louis through the window!

"Ho! varlet, take this purse and hie thee hence to tell thy mistress I await her coming."

And so, notwithstanding their marvellous courage, and although their trade was quite lucrative, the Delobelles often found themselves in straitened circumstances, especially in the dull season of the *Articles de Paris*.

Luckily the excellent Risler was at hand, always ready to accommodate his friends.

Guillaume Risler, the third tenant on the landing, lived with his brother Frantz, who was fifteen years his junior. The two young Swiss, tall and fair, strong and ruddy, brought into the dismal, hard-working house glimpses of the country and of health. The elder was a draughtsman at the Fromont factory and was paying for the education of his brother, who attended Chaptal's lectures, pending his admission to the Ecole Centrale.

On his arrival at Paris, being sadly perplexed as to the installation of his little household, Guillaume had

derived from his neighbors, Mesdames Chèbe and Delobelle, advice and information which were an indispensable aid to that ingenuous, timid, somewhat heavy youth, embarrassed by his foreign accent and manner. After a brief period of neighborhood and mutual services, the Risler brothers formed a part of both families.

On holidays places were always made for them at one table or the other, and it was a great satisfaction to the two exiles to find in those poor households, modest and straitened as they were, a taste of affection and family life.

The wages of the designer, who was very clever at his trade, enabled him to be of service to the Delobelles on rent-day, and to make his appearance at the Chèbes' in the guise of the rich uncle, always laden with surprises and presents, so that the little girl, as soon as she saw him, would explore his pockets and climb on his knees.

On Sunday he would take them all to the theatre; and almost every evening he would go with Messieurs Chèbe and Delobelle to a brewery on the Rue Blondel, where he regaled them with beer and pretzels. Beer and pretzels were his only vice.

For his own part, he knew no greater bliss than to sit before a foaming tankard, between his two friends, listening to their talk, and taking part only by a loud laugh or a shake of the head in their conversation, which was usually a long succession of grievances against society.

A childlike shyness, and the Germanisms of speech

which he never had laid aside in his life of absorbing toil, embarrassed him much in giving expression to his ideas. Moreover, his friends overawed him. They had in respect to him the tremendous superiority of the man who does nothing over the man who works; and M. Chèbe, less generous than Delobelle, did not hesitate to make him feel it. He was very lofty with him, was M. Chèbe! In his opinion, a man who worked, as Risler did, ten hours a day, was incapable, when he left his work, of expressing an intelligent idea. Sometimes the designer, coming home worried from the factory, would prepare to spend the night over some pressing work. You should have seen M. Chèbe's scandalized expression then!

"Nobody could make *me* follow such a business!" he would say, expanding his chest, and he would add, looking at Risler with the air of a physician making a professional call, "Just wait till you've had one severe attack."

Delobelle was not so fierce, but he adopted a still loftier tone. The cedar does not see a rose at its foot. Delobelle did not see Risler at his feet.

When, by chance, the great man deigned to notice his presence, he had a certain air of stooping down to him to listen, and to smile at his words as at a child's; or else he would amuse himself by dazzling him with stories of actresses, would give him lessons in deportment and the addresses of outfitters, unable to understand why a man who earned so much money should always be dressed like an usher at a primary school. Honest Risler, convinced of his inferiority, would try

to earn forgiveness by a multitude of little attentions, obliged to furnish all the delicacy, of course, as he was the constant benefactor.

Among these three households living on the same floor, little Chèbe, with her goings and comings, formed the bond of union.

At all times of day she would slip into the workroom of the Delobelles, amuse herself by watching their work and looking at all the insects, and, being already more coquettish than playful, if an insect had lost a wing in its travels, or a humming-bird its necklace of down, she would try to make herself a headdress of the remains, to fix that brilliant shaft of color among the ripples of her silky hair. It made Désirée and her mother smile to see her stand on tiptoe in front of the old tarnished mirror, with affected little shrugs and grimaces. Then, when she had had enough of admiring herself, the child would open the door with all the strength of her little fingers, and would go demurely, holding her head perfectly straight for fear of disarranging her headdress, and knock at the Rislers' door.

No one was there in the daytime but Frantz the student, leaning over his books, doing his duty faithfully. But when Sidonie enters, farewell to study! Everything must be put aside to receive that lovely creature with the humming-bird in her hair, pretending to be a princess who had come to Chaptal's school to ask his hand in marriage from the director.

It was really a strange sight to see that tall, overgrown boy playing with that little girl of eight, humoring her caprices, adoring her as he yielded to her, so

that later, when he fell genuinely in love with her, no one could have said at what time the change began.

Petted as she was in those two homes, little Chèbe was very fond of running to the window on the landing. There it was that she found her greatest source of entertainment, a horizon always open, a sort of vision of the future toward which she leaned with eager curiosity and without fear, for children are not subject to vertigo.

Between the slated roofs sloping toward one another, the high wall of the factory, the tops of the plane-trees in the garden, the many-windowed workshops appeared to her like a promised land, the country of her dreams.

That Fromont establishment was to her mind the highest ideal of wealth.

The place it occupied in that part of the Marais, which was at certain hours enveloped by its smoke and its din, Risler's enthusiasm, his fabulous tales concerning his employer's wealth and goodness and cleverness, had aroused that childish curiosity; and such portions as she could see of the dwelling-houses, the carved wooden blinds, the circular front steps, with the garden-seats before them, a great white bird-house with gilt stripes glistening in the sun, the blue-lined coupé standing in the courtyard, were to her objects of continual admiration.

She knew all the habits of the family: At what hour the bell was rung, when the workmen went away, the Saturday pay-day which kept the cashier's little lamp lighted late in the evening, and the long Sunday afternoon, the closed workshops, the smokeless chimney,

the profound silence which enabled her to hear Mademoiselle Claire at play in the garden, running about with her cousin Georges. From Risler she obtained details.

"Show me the salon windows," she would say to him, "and Claire's room."

Risler, delighted by this extraordinary interest in his beloved factory, would explain to the child from their lofty position the arrangement of the buildings, point out the print-shop, the gilding-shop, the designing-room where he worked, the engine-room, above which towered that enormous chimney blackening all the neighboring walls with its corrosive smoke, and which never suspected that a young life, concealed beneath a neighboring roof, mingled its inmost thoughts with its loud, indefatigable panting.

At last one day Sidonie entered that paradise of which she had heretofore caught only a glimpse.

Madame Fromont, to whom Risler often spoke of her little neighbor's beauty and intelligence, asked him to bring her to the children's ball she intended to give at Christmas. At first Monsieur Chèbe replied by a curt refusal. Even in those days, the Fromonts, whose name was always on Risler's lips, irritated and humiliated him by their wealth. Moreover, it was to be a fancy ball, and M. Chèbe—who did not sell wall-papers, not he!—could not afford to dress his daughter as a circus-dancer. But Risler insisted, declared that he would get everything himself, and at once set about designing a costume.

It was a memorable evening.

In Madame Chèbe's bedroom, littered with pieces of cloth and pins and small toilet articles, Désirée Delobelle superintended Sidonie's toilet. The child, appearing taller because of her short skirt of red flannel with black stripes, stood before the mirror, erect and motionless, in the glittering splendor of her costume. She was charming. The waist, with bands of velvet laced over the white stomacher, the lovely, long tresses of chestnut hair escaping from a hat of plaited straw, all the trivial details of her Savoyard's costume were heightened by the intelligent features of the child, who was quite at her ease in the brilliant colors of that theatrical garb.

The whole assembled neighborhood uttered cries of admiration. While some one went in search of Delobelle, the lame girl arranged the folds of the skirt, the bows on the shoes, and cast a final glance over her work, without laying aside her needle; she, too, was excited, poor child! by the intoxication of that festivity to which she was not invited. The great man arrived. He made Sidonie rehearse two or three stately curtseys which he had taught her, the proper way to walk, to stand, to smile with her mouth slightly open, and the exact position of the little finger. It was truly amusing to see the precision with which the child went through the drill.

"She has dramatic blood in her veins!" exclaimed the old actor enthusiastically, unable to understand why that stupid Frantz was strongly inclined to weep.

A year after that happy evening Sidonie could have told you what flowers there were in the reception-

rooms, the color of the furniture, and the music they were playing as she entered the ballroom, so deep an impression did her enjoyment make upon her. She forgot nothing, neither the costumes that made an eddying whirl about her, nor the childish laughter, nor all the tiny steps that glided over the polished floors. For a moment, as she sat on the edge of a great red-silk couch, taking from the plate presented to her the first sherbet of her life, she suddenly thought of the dark stairway, of her parents' stuffy little rooms, and it produced upon her mind the effect of a distant country which she had left forever.

However, she was considered a fascinating little creature, and was much admired and petted. Claire Fromont, a miniature Cauchoise dressed in lace, presented her to her cousin Georges, a magnificent hussar who turned at every step to observe the effect of his sabre.

"You understand, Georges, she is my friend. She is coming to play with us Sundays. Mamma says she may."

And, with the artless impulsiveness of a happy child, she kissed little Chèbe with all her heart.

But the time came to go. For a long time, in the filthy street where the snow was melting, in the dark hall, in the silent room where her mother awaited her, the brilliant light of the salons continued to shine before her dazzled eyes.

"Was it very fine? Did you have a charming time?" queried Madame Chèbe in a low tone, unfastening the buckles of the gorgeous costume, one by one.

And Sidonie, overcome with fatigue, made no reply, but fell asleep standing, beginning a lovely dream which was to last throughout her youth and cost her many tears.

Claire Fromont kept her word. Sidonie often went to play in the beautiful gravelled garden, and was able to see at close range the carved blinds and the dovecot with its threads of gold. She came to know all the corners and hiding-places in the great factory, and took part in many glorious games of hide-and-seek behind the printing-tables in the solitude of Sunday afternoon. On holidays a plate was laid for her at the children's table.

Everybody loved her, although she never exhibited much affection for any one. So long as she was in the midst of that luxury, she was conscious of softer impulses, she was happy and felt that she was embellished by her surroundings; but when she returned to her parents, when she saw the factory through the dirty panes of the window on the landing, she had an inexplicable feeling of regret and anger.

And yet Claire Fromont treated her as a friend.

Sometimes they took her to the Bois, to the Tuileries, in the famous blue-lined carriage, or into the country, to pass a whole week at Grandfather Gardinois's château, at Savigny-sur-Orge. Thanks to the munificence of Risler, who was very proud of his little one's success, she was always presentable and well dressed. Madame Chèbe made it a point of honor, and the pretty, lame girl was always at hand to place her treasures of unused coquetry at her little friend's service.

But M. Chèbe, who was always hostile to the Fromonts, looked frowningly upon this growing intimacy. The true reason was that he himself never was invited; but he gave other reasons, and would say to his wife:

"Don't you see that your daughter's heart is sad when she returns from that house, and that she passes whole hours dreaming at the window?"

But poor Madame Chèbe, who had been so unhappy ever since her marriage, had become reckless. She declared that one should make the most of the present for fear of the future, should seize happiness as it passes, as one often has no other support and consolation in life than the memory of a happy childhood.

For once it happened that M. Chèbe was right.

CHAPTER III

THE FALSE PEARLS

FTER two or three years of intimacy with Claire, of sharing her amusements, years during which Sidonie acquired the familiarity with luxury and the graceful manners of the children of the wealthy, the friendship was suddenly broken.

Cousin Georges, whose guardian M. Fromont was, had entered college some time before. Claire in her turn took her departure for the convent with the outfit of a little queen; and at that very time the Chèbes were discussing the question of apprenticing Sidonie to some trade. They promised to love each other as before and to meet twice a month, on the Sundays that Claire was permitted to go home.

Indeed, little Chèbe did still go down sometimes to play with her friends; but as she grew older she realized more fully the distance that separated them, and her clothes began to seem to her very simple for Madame Fromont's salon.

When the three were alone, the childish friendship which made them equals prevented any feeling of embarrassment; but vistors came, girl friends from the convent, among others a tall girl, always richly dressed,

whom her mother's maid used to bring to play with the little Fromonts on Sunday.

As soon as she saw her coming up the steps, resplendent and disdainful, Sidonie longed to go away at once. The other embarrassed her with awkward questions. Where did she live? What did her parents do? Had she a carriage?

As she listened to their talk of the convent and their friends, Sidonie felt that they lived in a different world, a thousand miles from her own; and a deathly sadness seized her, especially when, on her return home, her mother spoke of sending her as an apprentice to Mademoiselle Le Mire, a friend of the Delobelles, who conducted a large false-pearl establishment on the Rue du Roi-Doré.

Risler insisted upon the plan of having the little one serve an apprenticeship. "Let her learn a trade," said the honest fellow. "Later I will undertake to set her up in business."

Indeed, this same Mademoiselle Le Mire spoke of retiring in a few years. It was an excellent opportunity.

One morning, a dull day in November, her father took her to the Rue du Rio-Doré, to the fourth floor of an old house, even older and blacker than her own home.

On the ground floor, at the entrance to the hall, hung a number of signs with gilt letters: *Dépôt for Travelling-Bags, Plated Chains, Children's Toys, Mathematical Instruments in Glass, Bouquets for Brides and Maids of Honor, Wild Flowers a Specialty;* and above

was a little dusty show-case, wherein pearls, yellow with age, glass grapes and cherries surrounded the pretentious name of Angélina Le Mire.

What a horrible house!

It had not even a broad landing like that of the Chèbes, grimy with old age, but brightened by its window and the beautiful prospect presented by the factory. A narrow staircase, a narrow door, a succession of rooms with brick floors, all small and cold, and in the last an old maid with a false front and black thread mitts, reading a soiled copy of the *Journal pour Tous*, and apparently very much annoyed to be disturbed in her reading.

Mademoiselle Le Mire (written in two words) received the father and daughter without rising, discoursed at great length of the rank she had lost, of her father, an old nobleman of Le Rouergue—it is most extraordinary how many old noblemen Le Rouergue has produced!—and of an unfaithful steward who had carried off their whole fortune. She instantly aroused the sympathies of M. Chèbe, for whom decayed gentlefolk had an irresistible charm, and he went away overjoyed, promising his daughter to call for her at seven o'clock at night in accordance with the terms agreed upon.

The apprentice was at once ushered into the still empty workroom. Mademoiselle Le Mire seated her in front of a great drawer filled with pearls, needles, and bodkins, with instalments of four-sou novels thrown in at random among them.

It was Sidonie's business to sort the pearls and

string them in necklaces of equal length, which were tied together to be sold to the small dealers. Then the young women would soon be there and they would show her exactly what she would have to do, for Mademoiselle Le Mire (always written in two words!) did not interfere at all, but overlooked her business from a considerable distance, from that dark room where she passed her life reading newspaper novels.

At nine o'clock the workwomen arrived, five tall, pale-faced, faded girls, wretchedly dressed, but with their hair becomingly arranged, after the fashion of poor working-girls who go about bare-headed through the streets of Paris.

Two or three were yawning and rubbing their eyes, saying that they were dead with sleep.

At last they went to work beside a long table where each had her own drawer and her own tools. An order had been received for mourning jewels, and haste was essential. Sidonie, whom the forewoman instructed in her task in a tone of infinite superiority, began dismally to sort a multitude of black pearls, bits of glass, and wisps of crape.

The others, paying no attention to the little girl, chatted together as they worked. They talked of a wedding that was to take place that very day at St.-Gervais.

"Suppose we go," said a stout, red-haired girl, whose name was Malvina. "It's to be at noon. We shall have time to go and get back again if we hurry."

And, at the lunch hour, the whole party rushed downstairs four steps at a time.

Sidonie had brought her luncheon in a little basket, like a school-girl; with a heavy heart she sat at a corner of the table and ate alone for the first time in her life. Great God! what a sad and wretched thing life seemed to be; what a terrible revenge she would take hereafter for her sufferings there!

At one o'clock the girls trooped noisily back, highly excited.

"Did you see the white satin gown? And the veil of *point d'Angleterre?* There's a lucky girl!"

Thereupon they repeated in the workroom the remarks they had made in undertones in the church, leaning against the rail, throughout the ceremony. That question of a wealthy marriage, of beautiful clothes, lasted all day long; nor did it interfere with their work—far from it.

These small Parisian industries, which have to do with the most trivial details of the toilet, keep the work-girls informed as to the fashions and fill their minds with thoughts of luxury and elegance. To the poor girls who worked on Mademoiselle Le Mire's fourth floor, the blackened walls, the narrow street did not exist. They were always thinking of something else and passed their lives asking one another:

"Malvina, if you were rich what would you do? For my part, I'd live on the Champs-Elysées." And the great trees in the square, the carriages that wheeled about there, coquettishly slackening their pace, appeared momentarily before their minds, a delicious, refreshing vision.

Little Chèbe, in her corner, listened without speak-

ing, industriously stringing her black grapes with the precocious dexterity and taste she had acquired in Désirée's neighborhood. So that in the evening, when M. Chèbe came to fetch his daughter, they praised her in the highest terms.

Thereafter all her days were alike. The next day, instead of black pearls, she strung white pearls and bits of false coral; for at Mademoiselle Le Mire's they worked only in what was false, in tinsel, and that was where little Chèbe was to serve her apprenticeship to life.

For some time the new apprentice—being younger and better bred than the others—found that they held aloof from her. Later, as she grew older, she was admitted to their friendship and their confidence, but without ever sharing their pleasures. She was too proud to go to see weddings at midday; and when she heard them talking of a ball at Vauxhall or the *Délices du Marais*, or of a nice little supper at Bonvalet's or at the *Quatre Sergents de la Rochelle*, she was always very disdainful.

We looked higher than that, did we not, little Chèbe?

Moreover, her father called for her every evening. Sometimes, however, about the New Year, she was obliged to work late with the others, in order to complete pressing orders. In the gaslight those pale-faced Parisians, sorting pearls as white as themselves, of a dead, unwholesome whiteness, were a painful spectacle. There was the same fictitious glitter, the same fragility of spurious jewels. They talked of nothing but masked balls and theatres.

"Have you seen Adèle Page, in *Les Trois Mousquetaires?* And Mélingue? And Marie Laurent? Oh! Marie Laurent!"

The actors' doublets, the embroidered costumes of the queens of melodrama, appeared before them in the white light of the necklaces forming beneath their fingers.

In summer the work was less pressing. It was the dull season. In the intense heat, when through the drawn blinds fruit-sellers could be heard in the street, crying their *mirabelles* and *Queen Claudes*, the work-girls slept heavily, their heads on the table. Or perhaps Malvina would go and ask Mademoiselle Le Mire for a copy of the *Journal pour Tous*, and read aloud to the others.

But little Chèbe did not care for the novels. She carried one in her head much more interesting than all that trash.

The fact is, nothing could make her forget the factory. When she set forth in the morning on her father's arm, she always cast a glance in that direction. At that hour the works were just stirring, the chimney emitted its first puff of black smoke. Sidonie, as she passed, could hear the shouts of the workmen, the dull, heavy blows of the bars of the printing-press, the mighty, rhythmical hum of the machinery; and all those sounds of toil, blended in her memory with recollections of *fêtes* and blue-lined carriages, haunted her persistently.

They spoke louder than the rattle of the omnibuses, the street cries, the cascades in the gutters; and even in

the workroom, when she was sorting the false pearls even at night, in her own home, when she went, after dinner, to breathe the fresh air at the window on the landing and to gaze at the dark, deserted factory, that murmur still buzzed in her ears, forming, as it were, a continual accompaniment to her thoughts.

"The little one is tired, Madame Chèbe. She needs diversion. Next Sunday I will take you all into the country."

These Sunday excursions, which honest Risler organized to amuse Sidonie, served only to sadden her still more.

On those days she must rise at four o'clock in the morning; for the poor must pay for all their enjoyments, and there was always a ribbon to be ironed at the last moment, or a bit of trimming to be sewn on in an attempt to rejuvenate the everlasting little lilac frock with white stripes which Madame Chèbe conscientiously lengthened every year.

They would all set off together, the Chèbes, the Risler's, and the illustrious Delobelle. Only Désirée and her mother never were of the party. The poor, crippled child, ashamed of her deformity, never would stir from her chair, and Mamma Delobelle stayed behind to keep her company. Moreover, neither possessed a suitable gown in which to show herself out-of-doors in their great man's company; it would have destroyed the whole effect of his appearance.

When they left the house, Sidonie would brighten up a little. Paris in the pink haze of a July morning, the railway stations filled with light dresses, the country fly-

ing past the car windows, and the healthful exercise, the bath in the pure air saturated with the water of the Seine, vivified by a bit of forest, perfumed by flowering meadows, by ripening grain, all combined to make her giddy for a moment. But that sensation was soon succeeded by disgust at such a commonplace way of passing her Sunday.

It was always the same thing.

They stopped at a refreshment booth, in close proximity to a very noisy and numerously attended rustic festival, for there must be an audience for Delobelle, who would saunter along, absorbed by his chimera, dressed in gray, with gray gaiters, a little hat over his ear, a light top coat on his arm, imagining that the stage represented a country scene in the suburbs of Paris, and that he was playing the part of a Parisian sojourning in the country.

As for M. Chèbe, who prided himself on being as fond of nature as the late Jean Jacques Rousseau, he did not appreciate it without the accompaniments of shooting-matches, wooden horses, sack races, and a profusion of dust and penny-whistles, which constituted also Madame Chèbe's ideal of a country life.

But Sidonie had a different ideal; and those Parisian Sundays passed in strolling through noisy village streets depressed her beyond measure. Her only pleasure in those throngs was the consciousness of being stared at. The veriest boor's admiration, frankly expressed aloud at her side, made her smile all day; for she was of those who disdain no compliment.

Sometimes, leaving the Chèbes and Delobelle in the

midst of the *fête*, Risler would go into the fields with his brother and the "little one" in search of flowers for patterns for his wall-papers. Frantz, with his long arms, would pull down the highest branches of a hawthorn, or would climb a park wall to pick a leaf of graceful shape he had spied on the other side. But they reaped their richest harvests on the banks of the stream.

There they found those flexible plants, with long swaying stalks, which made such a lovely effect on hangings, tall, straight reeds, and the volubilis, whose flower, opening suddenly as if in obedience to a caprice, resembles a living face, some one looking at you amid the lovely, quivering foliage. Risler arranged his bouquets artistically, drawing his inspiration from the very nature of the plants, trying to understand thoroughly their manner of life, which can not be divined after the withering of one day.

Then, when the bouquet was completed, tied with a broad blade of grass as with a ribbon, and slung over Frantz's back, away they went. Risler, always engrossed in his art, looked about for subjects, for possible combinations, as they walked along.

"Look there, little one—see that bunch of lily of the valley, with its white bells, among those eglantines. What do you think? Wouldn't that be pretty against a sea-green or pearl-gray background?"

But Sidonie cared no more for lilies of the valley than for eglantine. Wild flowers always seemed to her like the flowers of the poor, something like her lilac dress.

She remembered that she had seen flowers of a different sort at the house of M. Gardinois, at the Château de Savigny, in the hothouses, on the balconies, and all about the gravelled courtyard bordered with tall urns. Those were the flowers she loved; that was her idea of the country!

The little stations in the outskirts of Paris are so terribly crowded and stuffy on those Sunday evenings in summer! Such artificial enjoyment, such idiotic laughter, such doleful ballads, sung in whispers by voices that no longer have the strength to roar! That was the time when M. Chèbe was in his element.

He would elbow his way to the gate, scold about the delay of the train, declaim against the station-agent, the company, the government; say to Delobelle in a loud voice, so as to be overheard by his neighbors:

"I say—suppose such a thing as this should happen in America!" Which remark, thanks to the expressive by-play of the illustrious actor, and to the superior air with which he replied, "I believe you!" gave those who stood near to understand that these gentlemen knew exactly what would happen in America in such a case. Now, they were equally and entirely ignorant on that subject; but upon the crowd their words made an impression.

Sitting beside Frantz, with half of his bundle of flowers on her knees, Sidonie would seem to be blotted out, as it were, amid the uproar, during the long wait for the evening trains. From the station, lighted by a single lamp, she could see the black clumps of trees outside, lighted here and there by the last illuminations

of the *fête*, a dark village street, people continually coming in, and a lantern hanging on a deserted pier.

From time to time, on the other side of the glass doors, a train would rush by without stopping, with a shower of hot cinders and the roar of escaping steam. Thereupon a tempest of shouts and stamping would arise in the station, and, soaring above all the rest, the shrill treble of M. Chèbe, shrieking in his sea-gull's voice: "Break down the doors! break down the doors!"—a thing that the little man would have taken good care not to do himself, as he had an abject fear of gendarmes. In a moment the storm would abate. The tired women, their hair disarranged by the wind, would fall asleep on the benches. There were torn and ragged dresses, low-necked white gowns, covered with dust.

The air they breathed consisted mainly of dust. It lay upon their clothes, rose at every step, obscured the light of the lamp, vexed one's eyes, and raised a sort of cloud before the tired faces. The cars which they entered at last, after hours of waiting, were saturated with it also. Sidonie would open the window, and look out at the dark fields, an endless line of shadow. Then, like innumerable stars, the first lanterns of the outer boulevards appeared near the fortifications.

So ended the ghastly day of rest of all those poor creatures. The sight of Paris brought back to each one's mind the thought of the morrow's toil. Dismal as her Sunday had been, Sidonie began to regret that it had passed. She thought of the rich, to whom all the days of their lives were days of rest; and vaguely, as in a dream, the long park avenues of which she had

caught glimpses during the day appeared to her thronged with those happy ones of earth, strolling on the fine gravel, while outside the gate, in the dust of the high-road, the poor man's Sunday hurried swiftly by, having hardly time to pause a moment to look and envy.

Such was little Chèbe's life from thirteen to seventeen.

The years passed, but did not bring with them the slightest change. Madame Chèbe's cashmere was a little more threadbare, the little lilac frock had undergone a few additional repairs, and that was all. But, as Sidonie grew older, Frantz, now become a young man, acquired a habit of gazing at her silently with a melting expression, of paying her loving attentions that were visible to everybody, and were unnoticed by none save the girl herself.

Indeed, nothing aroused the interest of little Chèbe. In the work-room she performed her task regularly, silently, without the slightest thought of the future or of saving. All that she did seemed to be done as if she were waiting for something.

Frantz, on the other hand, had been working for some time with extraordinary energy, the ardor of those who see something at the end of their efforts; so that, at the age of twenty-four, he graduated second in his class from the Ecole Centrale, as an engineer.

On that evening Risler had taken the Chèbe family to the Gymnase, and throughout the evening he and Madame Chèbe had been making signs and winking at each other behind the children's backs. And when they left the theatre Madame Chèbe solemnly placed

Sidonie's arm in Frantz's, as if she would say to the lovelorn youth, "Now settle matters—here is your chance."

Thereupon the poor lover tried to settle matters.

It is a long walk from the Gymnase to the Marais. After a very few steps the brilliancy of the boulevard is left behind, the streets become darker and darker, the passers more and more rare. Frantz began by talking of the play. He was very fond of comedies of that sort, in which there was plenty of sentiment.

"And you, Sidonie?"

"Oh! as for me, Frantz, you know that so long as there are fine costumes——"

In truth she thought of nothing else at the theatre. She was not one of those sentimental creatures, *à la* Madame Bovary, who return from the play with love-phrases ready-made, a conventional ideal. No! the theatre simply made her long madly for luxury and fine raiment; she brought away from it nothing but new methods of arranging the hair, and patterns of gowns. The new, exaggerated toilettes of the actresses, their gait, even the spurious elegance of their speech, which seemed to her of the highest distinction, and with it all the tawdry magnificence of the gilding and the lights, the gaudy placard at the door, the long line of carriages, and all the somewhat unwholesome excitement that springs up about a popular play; that was what she loved, that was what absorbed her thoughts.

"How well they acted their love-scene!" continued the lover.

And, as he uttered that suggestive phrase, he bent

fondly toward a little face surrounded by a white woollen hood, from which the hair escaped in rebellious curls.

Sidonie sighed:

"Oh! yes, the love-scene. The actress wore beautiful diamonds."

There was a moment's silence. Poor Frantz had much difficulty in explaining himself. The words he sought would not come, and then, too, he was afraid. He fixed the time mentally when he would speak:

"When we have passed the Porte Saint-Denis—when we have left the boulevard."

But when the time arrived, Sidonie began to talk of such indifferent matters that his declaration froze on his lips, or else it was stopped by a passing carriage, which enabled their elders to overtake them.

At last, in the Marais, he suddenly took courage:

"Listen to me, Sidonie—I love you!"

That night the Delobelles had sat up very late.

It was the habit of those brave-hearted women to make their working-day as long as possible, to prolong it so far into the night that their lamp was among the last to be extinguished on the quiet Rue de Braque. They always sat up until the great man returned home, and kept a dainty little supper warm for him in the ashes on the hearth.

In the days when he was an actor there was some reason for that custom; actors, being obliged to dine early and very sparingly, have a terrible gnawing at their vitals when they leave the theatre, and usually eat when they go home. Delobelle had not acted for a long time; but having, as he said, no right to abandon the

stage, he kept his mania alive by clinging to a number of the strolling player's habits, and the supper on returning home was one of them, as was his habit of delaying his return until the last footlight in the boulevard theatres was extinguished. To retire without supping, at the hour when all other artists supped, would have been to abdicate, to abandon the struggle, and he would not abandon it, *sacre bleu!*

On the evening in question the actor had not yet come in and the women were waiting for him, talking as they worked, and with great animation, notwithstanding the lateness of the hour. During the whole evening they had done nothing but talk of Frantz, of his success, of the future that lay before him.

"Now," said Mamma Delobelle, "the only thing he needs is to find a good little wife."

That was Désirée's opinion, too. That was all that was lacking now to Frantz's happiness, a good little wife, active and brave and accustomed to work, who would forget everything for him. And if Désirée spoke with great confidence, it was because she was intimately acquainted with the woman who was so well adapted to Frantz Risler's needs. She was only a year younger than he, just enough to make her younger than her husband and a mother to him at the same time.

Pretty?

No, not exactly, but attractive rather than ugly, notwithstanding her infirmity, for she was lame, poor child! And then she was clever and bright, and so loving! No one but Désirée knew how fondly that little woman loved Frantz, and how she had thought of him night

and day for years. He had not noticed it himself, but seemed to have eyes for nobody but Sidonie, a *gamine*. But no matter! Silent love is so eloquent, such a mighty power lies hid in restrained feelings. Who knows? Perhaps some day or other——

And the little cripple, leaning over her work, started upon one of those long journeys to the land of chimeras of which she had made so many in her invalid's easy-chair, with her feet resting on the stool; one of those wonderful journeys from which she always returned happy and smiling, leaning on Frantz's arm with all the confidence of a beloved wife. As her fingers followed her thought, the little bird she had in her hand at the moment, smoothing his ruffled wings, looked as if he too were of the party and were about to fly far, far away, as joyous and light of heart as she.

Suddenly the door flew open.

"I do not disturb you?" said a triumphant voice.

The mother, who was slightly drowsy, suddenly raised her head.

"Ah! it's Monsieur Frantz. Pray come in, Monsieur Frantz. We're waiting for father, as you see. These brigands of artists always stay out so late! Take a seat —you shall have supper with him."

"Oh! no, thank you," replied Frantz, whose lips were still pale from the emotion he had undergone, "I can't stop. I saw a light and I just stepped in to tell you—to tell you some great news that will make you very happy, because I know that you love me——"

"Great heavens, what is it?"

"Monsieur Frantz Risler and Mademoiselle Sidonie are engaged to be married."

"There! didn't I say that all he needed was a good little wife," exclaimed Mamma Delobelle, rising and throwing her arms about his neck.

Désirée had not the strength to utter a word. She bent still lower over her work, and as Frantz's eyes were fixed exclusively upon his happiness, as Mamma Delobelle did nothing but look at the clock to see whether her great man would return soon, no one noticed the lame girl's emotion, nor her pallor, nor the convulsive trembling of the little bird that lay in her hands with its head thrown back, like a bird with its death-wound.

CHAPTER IV

THE GLOW-WORMS OF SAVIGNY

"SAVIGNY-SUR-ORGE.

Y DEAR SIDONIE:—We were sitting at table yesterday in the great dining-room which you remember, with the door wide open leading to the terrace, where the flowers are all in bloom. I was a little bored. Dear grandpapa had been cross all the morning, and poor mamma dared not say a word, being afraid of those frowning eyebrows which have always laid down the law for her. I was thinking what a pity it was to be so entirely alone, in the middle of the summer, in such a lovely spot, and that I should be very glad, now that I have left the convent, and am destined to pass whole seasons in the country, to have as in the old day, some one to run about the woods and paths with me.

"To be sure, Georges comes occasionally, but he always arrives very late, just in time for dinner, and is off again with my father in the morning before I am awake. And then he is a serious-minded man now, is Monsieur Georges. He works at the factory, and business cares often bring frowns to his brow.

"I had reached that point in my reflections when suddenly dear grandpapa turned abruptly to me:

"'What has become of your little friend Sidonie? I should be glad to have her here for a time.'

"You can imagine my delight. What happiness to meet again, to renew the pleasant friendship that was broken off by the fault of the events of life rather than by our own! How many

things we shall have to tell each other! You, who alone had the knack of driving the frowns from my terrible grandpapa's brow, will bring us gayety, and I assure you we need it.

"This lovely Savigny is so lonely! For instance, sometimes in the morning I choose to be a little coquettish. I dress myself, I make myself beautiful with my hair in curls and put on a pretty gown; I walk through all the paths, and suddenly I realize that I have taken all this trouble for the swans and ducks, my dog Kiss, and the cows, who do not even turn to look at me when I pass. Thereupon, in my wrath, I hurry home, put on a thick gown and busy myself on the farm, in the servants' quarters, everywhere. And really, I am beginning to believe that *ennui* has perfected me, and that I shall make an excellent housekeeper.

"Luckily the hunting season will soon be here, and I rely upon that for a little amusement. In the first place, Georges and father, both enthusiastic sportsmen, will come oftener. And then you will be here, you know. For you will reply at once that you will come, won't you? Monsieur Risler said not long ago that you were not well. The air of Savigny will do you worlds of good.

"Everybody here expects you. And I am dying with impatience. CLAIRE."

Her letter written, Claire Fromont donned a large straw hat—for the first days of August were warm and glorious—and went herself to drop it in the little box from which the postman collected the mail from the château every morning.

It was on the edge of the park, at a turn in the road. She paused a moment to look at the trees by the roadside, at the neighboring meadows sleeping in the bright sunlight. Over yonder the reapers were gathering the last sheaves. Farther on they were ploughing. But all the melancholy of the silent toil had vanished, so far as

the girl was concerned, so delighted was she at the thought of seeing her friend once more.

No breeze came from the hills in the distance, no voice from the trees, to warn her by a presentiment, to prevent her from sending that fatal letter. And immediately upon her return she gave her attention to the preparation of a pretty bedroom for Sidonie adjoining her own.

The letter did its errand faithfully. From the little green, vine-embowered gate of the château it found its way to Paris, and arrived that same evening, with its Savigny postmark and impregnated with the odor of the country, at the fifth-floor apartment on the Rue de Braque.

What an event that was! They read it again and again; and for a whole week, until Sidonie's departure, it lay on the mantel-shelf beside Madame Chèbe's treasures, the clock under a glass globe and the Empire cups. To Sidonie it was like a wonderful romance filled with tales of enchantment and promises, which she read without opening it, merely by gazing at the white envelope whereon Claire Fromont's monogram was engraved in relief.

Little she thought of marriage now. The important question was, What clothes should she wear at the château? She must give her whole mind to that, to cutting and planning, trying on dresses, devising new ways of arranging her hair. Poor Frantz! How heavy his heart was made by these preparations! That visit to Savigny, which he had tried vainly to oppose, would cause a still further postponement of their wedding,

which Sidonie—why, he did not know—persisted in putting off from day to day. He could not go to see her; and when she was once there, in the midst of festivities and pleasures, who could say how long she would remain?

The lover in his despair always went to the Delobelles to confide his sorrows, but he never noticed how quickly Désirée rose as soon as he entered, to make room for him by her side at the work-takle, and how she at once sat down again, with cheeks as red as fire and shining eyes.

For some days past they had ceased to work at birds and insects for ornament. The mother and daughter were hemming pink flounces destined for Sidonie's frock, and the little cripple never had plied her needle with such good heart.

In truth little Désirée was not Delobelle's daughter to no purpose.

She inherited her father's faculty of retaining his illusions, of hoping on to the end and even beyond.

While Frantz was dilating upon his woe, Désirée was thinking that, when Sidonie was gone, he would come every day, if it were only to talk about the absent one; that she would have him there by her side, that they would sit up together waiting for "father," and that, perhaps, some evening, as he sat looking at her, he would discover the difference between the woman who loves you and the one who simply allows herself to be loved.

Thereupon the thought that every stitch taken in the frock tended to hasten the departure which she anticipated with such impatience imparted extraordinary

activity to her needle, and the unhappy lover ruefully watched the flounces and ruffles piling up about her, like little pink, white-capped waves.

When the pink frock was finished, Mademoiselle Chèbe started for Savigny.

The château of M. Gardinois was built in the valley of the Orge, on the bank of that capriciously lovely stream, with its windmills, its little islands, its dams, and its broad lawns that end at its shores.

The château, an old Louis-Quinze structure, low in reality, although made to appear high by a pointed roof, had a most depressing aspect, suggestive of aristocratic antiquity; broad steps, balconies with rusty balustrades, old urns marred by time, wherein the flowers stood out vividly against the reddish stone. As far as the eye could see, the walls stretched away, decayed and crumbling, descending gradually toward the stream. The château overlooked them, with its high, slated roofs, the farmhouse, with its red tiles, and the superb park, with its lindens, ash-trees, poplars and chestnuts growing confusedly together in a dense black mass, cut here and there by the arched openings of the paths.

But the charm of the old place was the water, which enlivened its silence and gave character to its beautiful views. There were at Savigny, to say nothing of the river, many springs, fountains, and ponds, in which the sun sank to rest in all his glory; and they formed a suitable setting for that venerable mansion, green and mossy as it was, and slightly worn away, like a stone on the edge of a brook.

Unluckily, at Savigny, as in most of those gorgeous Parisian summer palaces, which the *parvenus* in commerce and speculation have made their prey, the *châtelains* were not in harmony with the château.

Since he had purchased his château, old Gardinois had done nothing but injure the beauty of the beautiful property chance had placed in his hands; cut down trees "for the view," filled his park with rough obstructions to keep out trespassers, and reserved all his solicitude for a magnificent kitchen-garden, which, as it produced fruit and vegetables in abundance, seemed to him more like his own part of the country—the land of the peasant.

As for the great salons, where the panels with paintings of famous subjects were fading in the autumn fogs, as for the ponds overrun with water-lilies, the grottoes, the stone bridges, he cared for them only because of the admiration of visitors, and because of such elements was composed that thing which so flattered his vanity as an ex-dealer in cattle—a château!

Being already old, unable to hunt or fish, he passed his time superintending the most trivial details of that large property. The grain for the hens, the price of the last load of the second crop of hay, the number of bales of straw stored in a magnificent circular granary, furnished him with matter for scolding for a whole day; and certain it is that, when one gazed from a distance at that lovely estate of Savigny, the château on the hillside, the river, like a mirror, flowing at its feet, the high terraces shaded by ivy, the supporting wall of the park following the majestic slope of the ground, one never

would have suspected the proprietor's niggardliness and meanness of spirit.

In the idleness consequent upon his wealth, M. Gardinois, being greatly bored in Paris, lived at Savigny throughout the year, and the Fromonts lived with him during the summer.

Madame Fromont was a mild, dull woman, whom her father's brutal despotism had early molded to passive obedience for life. She maintained the same attitude with her husband, whose constant kindness and indulgence never had succeeded in triumphing over that humiliated, taciturn nature, indifferent to everything, and, in some sense, irresponsible. Having passed her life with no knowledge of business, she had become rich without knowing it and without the slightest desire to take advantage of it. Her fine apartments in Paris, her father's magnificent château, made her uncomfortable. She occupied as small a place as possible in both, filling her life with a single passion, order—a fantastic, abnormal sort of order, which consisted in brushing, wiping, dusting, and polishing the mirrors, the gilding and the door-knobs, with her own hands, from morning till night.

When she had nothing else to clean, the strange woman would attack her rings, her watch-chain, her brooches, scrubbing the cameos and pearls, and, by dint of polishing the combination of her own name and her husband's, she had effaced all the letters of both. Her fixed idea followed her to Savigny. She picked up dead branches in the paths, scratched the moss from the benches with the end of her umbrella, and would

have liked to dust the leaves and sweep down the old trees; and often, when in the train, she looked with envy at the little villas standing in a line along the track, white and clean, with their gleaming utensils, the pewter ball, and the little oblong gardens, which resemble drawers in a bureau. Those were her ideal of a country-house.

M. Fromont, who came only occasionally and was always absorbed by his business affairs, enjoyed Savigny little more than she. Claire alone felt really at home in that lovely park. She was familiar with its smallest shrub. Being obliged to provide her own amusements, like all only children, she had become attached to certain walks, watched the flowers bloom, had her favorite path, her favorite tree, her favorite bench for reading. The dinner-bell always surprised her far away in the park. She would come to the table, out of breath but happy, flushed with the fresh air. The shadow of the hornbeams, stealing over that youthful brow, had imprinted a sort of gentle melancholy there, and the deep, dark green of the ponds, crossed by vague rays, was reflected in her eyes.

Those lovely surroundings had in very truth shielded her from the vulgarity and the abjectness of the persons about her. M. Gardinois might deplore in her presence, for hours at a time, the perversity of tradesmen and servants, or make an estimate of what was being stolen from him each month, each week, every day, every minute; Madame Fromont might enumerate her grievances against the mice, the maggots, dust and dampness, all desperately bent upon destroying her

property, and engaged in a conspiracy against her wardrobes; not a word of their foolish talk remained in Claire's mind. A run around the lawn, an hour's reading on the river-bank, restored the tranquillity of that noble and intensely active mind.

Her grandfather looked upon her as a strange being, altogether out of place in his family. As a child she annoyed him with her great, honest eyes, her straightforwardness on all occasions, and also because he did not find in her a second edition of his own passive and submissive daughter.

"That child will be a proud chit and an original, like her father," he would say in his ugly moods.

How much better he liked that little Chèbe girl who used to come now and then and play in the avenues at Savigny! In her, at least, he detected the strain of the common people like himself, with a sprinkling of ambition and envy, suggested even in those early days by a certain little smile at the corner of the mouth. Moreover, the child exhibited an ingenuous amazement and admiration in presence of his wealth, which flattered his *parvenu* pride; and sometimes, when he teased her, she would break out with the droll phrases of a Paris *gamine*, slang redolent of the faubourgs, seasoned by her pretty, piquant face, inclined to pallor, which not even superficiality could deprive of its distinction. So he never had forgotten her.

On this occasion above all, when Sidonie arrived at Savigny after her long absence, with her fluffy hair, her graceful figure, her bright, mobile face, the whole effect emphasized by mannerisms suggestive of the shop-

girl, she produced a decided sensation. Old Gardinois, wondering greatly to see a tall young woman in place of the child he was expecting to see, considered her prettier and, above all, better dressed than Claire.

It was a fact that, when Mademoiselle Chèbe had left the train and was seated in the great wagonette from the château, her appearance was not bad; but she lacked those details that constituted her friend's chief beauty and charm—a distinguished carriage, a contempt for poses, and, more than all else, mental tranquillity. Her prettiness was not unlike her gowns, of inexpensive materials, but cut according to the style of the day—rags, if you will, but rags of which fashion, that ridiculous but charming fairy, had regulated the color, the trimming, and the shape. Paris has pretty faces made expressly for costumes of that sort, very easy to dress becomingly, for the very reason that they belong to no type, and Mademoiselle Sidonie's face was one of these.

What bliss was hers when the carriage entered the long avenue, bordered with velvety grass and primeval elms, and at the end Savigny awaiting her with its great gate wide open!

And how thoroughly at ease she felt amid all those refinements of wealth! How perfectly that sort of life suited her! It seemed to her that she never had known any other.

Suddenly, in the midst of her intoxication, arrived a letter from Frantz, which brought her back to the realities of her life, to her wretched fate as the future wife of a government clerk, which transported her, whether she

would or no, to the mean little apartment they would occupy some day at the top of some dismal house, whose heavy atmosphere, dense with privation, she seemed already to breathe.

Should she break her betrothal promise?

She certainly could do it, as she had given no other pledge than her word. But when he had left her, who could say that she would not wish him back?

In that little brain, turned by ambition, the strangest ideas chased one another. Sometimes, while Grandfather Gardinois, who had laid aside in her honor his old-fashioned hunting-jackets and swanskin waistcoats, was jesting with her, amusing himself by contradicting her in order to draw out a sharp reply, she would gaze steadily, coldly into his eyes, without replying. Ah! if only he were ten years younger! But the thought of becoming Madame Gardinois did not long occupy her. A new personage, a new hope came into her life.

After Sidonie's arrival, Georges Fromont, who was seldom seen at Savigny except on Sundays, adopted the habit of coming to dinner almost every day.

He was a tall, slender, pale youth, of refined appearance. Having no father or mother, he had been brought up by his uncle, M. Fromont, and was looked upon by him to succeed him in business, and probably to become Claire's husband. That ready-made future did not arouse any enthusiasm in Georges. In the first place business bored him. As for his cousin, the intimate good-fellowship of an education in common and mutual confidence existed between them, but nothing more, at least on his side.

With Sidonie, on the contrary, he was exceedingly embarrassed and shy, and at the same time desirous of producing an effect—a totally different man, in short. She had just the spurious charm, a little free, which was calculated to attract a superficial nature, and it was not long before she discovered the impression that she produced upon him.

When the two girls were walking together in the park, it was always Sidonie who remembered that it was time for the train from Paris to arrive. They would go together to the gate to meet the travellers, and Georges's first glance was always for Mademoiselle Chèbe, who remained a little behind her friend, but with the poses and airs that go halfway to meet the eyes. That manœuvring between them lasted some time. They did not mention love, but all the words, all the smiles they exchanged were full of silent avowals.

One cloudy and threatening summer evening, when the two friends had left the table as soon as dinner was at an end and were walking in the long, shady avenue, Georges joined them. They were talking upon indifferent subjects, crunching the gravel beneath their idling footsteps, when Madame Fromont's voice, from the château, called Claire away. Georges and Sidonie were left alone. They continued to walk along the avenue, guided by the uncertain whiteness of the path, without speaking of drawing nearer to each other.

A warm wind rustled among the leaves. The ruffled surface of the pond lapped softly against the arches of the little bridge; and the blossoms of the acacias and lindens, detached by the breeze, whirled about in cir-

cles, perfuming the electricity-laden air. They felt themselves surrounded by an atmosphere of storm, vibrant and penetrating. Dazzling flashes of heat passed before their troubled eyes, like those that played along the horizon.

"Oh! what lovely glow-worms!" exclaimed Sidonie, embarrassed by the oppressive silence broken by so many mysterious sounds.

On the edge of the greensward a blade of grass here and there was illuminated by a tiny, green, flickering light. She stooped to lift one on her glove. Georges knelt close beside her; and as they leaned down, their hair and cheeks touching, they gazed at each other for a moment by the light of the glow-worms. How weird and fascinating she seemed to him in that green light, which shone upon her face and died away in the fine network of her waving hair! He put his arm around her waist, and suddenly, feeling that she abandoned herself to him, he clasped her in a long, passionate embrace.

"What are you looking for?" asked Claire, suddenly coming up in the shadow behind them.

Taken by surprise, and with a choking sensation in his throat, Georges trembled so that he could not reply. Sidonie, on the other hand, rose with the utmost coolness, and said as she shook out her skirt:

"The glow-worms. See how many of them there are to-night. And how they sparkle."

Her eyes also sparkled with extraordinary brilliancy.

"The storm makes them, I suppose," murmured Georges, still trembling.

The storm was indeed near. At brief intervals great clouds of leaves and dust whirled from one end of the avenue to the other. They walked a few steps farther, then all three returned to the house. The young women took their work, Georges tried to read a newspaper, while Madame Fromont polished her rings and M. Gardinois and his son-in-law played billiards in the adjoining room.

How long that evening seemed to Sidonie! She had but one wish, to be alone—alone with her thoughts.

But, in the silence of her little bedroom, when she had put out her light, which interferes with dreams by casting too bright an illumination upon reality, what schemes, what transports of delight! Georges loved her, Georges Fromont, the heir of the factory! They would marry; she would be rich. For in that mercenary little heart the first kiss of love had awakened no ideas save those of ambition and a life of luxury.

To assure herself that her lover was sincere, she tried to recall the scene under the trees to its most trifling details, the expression of his eyes, the warmth of his embrace, the vows uttered brokenly, lips to lips, in that weird light shed by the glow-worms, which one solemn moment had fixed forever in her heart.

Oh! the glow-worms of Savigny!

All night long they twinkled like stars before her closed eyes. The park was full of them, to the farthest limits of its darkest paths. There were clusters of them all along the lawns, on the trees, in the shrubbery. The fine gravel of the avenues, the waves of the river, seemed

to emit green sparks, and all those microscopic flashes formed a sort of holiday illumination in which Savigny seemed to be enveloped in her honor, to celebrate the betrothal of Georges and Sidonie.

When she rose the next day, her plan was formed. Georges loved her; that was certain. Did he contemplate marrying her? She had a suspicion that he did not, the clever minx! But that did not frighten her. She felt strong enough to triumph over that childish nature, at once weak and passionate. She had only to resist him, and that is exactly what she did.

For some days she was cold and indifferent, wilfully blind and devoid of memory. He tried to speak to her, to renew the blissful moment, but she avoided him, always placing some one between them.

Then he wrote to her.

He carried his notes himself to a hollow in a rock near a clear spring called "The Phantom," which was in the outskirts of the park, sheltered by a thatched roof. Sidonie thought that a charming episode. In the evening she must invent some story, a pretext of some sort for going to "The Phantom" alone. The shadow of the trees across the path, the mystery of the night, the rapid walk, the excitement, made her heart beat deliciously. She would find the letter saturated with dew, with the intense cold of the spring, and so white in the moonlight that she would hide it quickly for fear of being surprised.

And then, when she was alone, what joy to open it, to decipher those magic characters, those words of love which swam before her eyes, surrounded by dazzling

blue and yellow circles, as if she were reading her letter in the bright sunlight.

"I love you! Love me!" wrote Georges in every conceivable phrase.

At first she did not reply; but when she felt that he was fairly caught, entirely in her power, she declared herself concisely:

"I never will love any one but my husband."

Ah! she was a true woman already, was little Chèbe.

CHAPTER V

HOW LITTLE CHÈBE'S STORY ENDED

MEANWHILE September arrived. The hunting season brought together a large, noisy, vulgar party at the château. There were long dinners at which the wealthy *bourgeois* lingered slothfully and wearily, prone to fall asleep like peasants. They went in carriages to meet the returning hunters in the cool air of the autumn evening. The mist arose from the fields, from which the crops had been gathered; and while the frightened game flew along the stubble with plaintive cries, the darkness seemed to emerge from the forests whose dark masses increased in size, spreading out over the fields.

The carriage lamps were lighted, the hoods raised, and they drove quickly homeward with the fresh air blowing in their faces. The dining-hall, brilliantly illuminated, was filled with gayety and laughter.

Claire Fromont, embarrassed by the vulgarity of those about her, hardly spoke at all. Sidonie was at her brightest. The drive had given animation to her pale complexion and Parisian eyes. She knew how to laugh, understood a little too much, perhaps, and seemed to the male guests the only woman in the party. Her suc-

cess completed Georges's intoxication; but as his advances became more pronounced, she showed more and more reserve. Thereupon he determined that she should be his wife. He swore it to himself, with the exaggerated emphasis of weak characters, who seem always to combat beforehand the difficulties to which they know that they must yield some day.

It was the happiest moment of little Chèbe's life. Even aside from any ambitious project, her coquettish, false nature found a strange fascination in this intrigue, carried on mysteriously amid banquets and merry-makings.

No one about them suspected anything. Claire was at that healthy and delightful period of youth when the mind, only partly open, clings to the things it knows with blind confidence, in complete ignorance of treachery and falsehood. M. Fromont thought of nothing but his business. His wife polished her jewels with frenzied energy. Only old Gardinois and his little, gimlet-like eyes were to be feared; but Sidonie entertained him, and even if he had discovered anything, he was not the man to interfere with her future.

Her hour of triumph was near, when a sudden, unforeseen disaster blasted her hopes.

One Sunday morning M. Fromont was brought back fatally wounded from a hunting expedition. A bullet intended for a deer had pierced his temple. The château was turned upside-down.

All the hunters, among them the unknown bungler that had fired the fatal shot, started in haste for Paris. Claire, frantic with grief, entered the room where her

father lay on his deathbed, there to remain; and Risler, being advised of the catastrophe, came to take Sidonie home.

On the night before her departure she had a final meeting with Georges at The Phantom,—a farewell meeting, painful and stealthy, and made solemn by the proximity of death. They vowed, however, to love each other always; they agreed upon a method of writing to each other. Then they parted.

It was a sad journey home.

Sidonie returned abruptly to her every-day life, escorted by the despairing grief of Risler, to whom his dear master's death was an irreparable loss. On her arrival, she was compelled to describe her visit to the smallest detail; discuss the inmates of the château, the guests, the entertainments, the dinners, and the final catastrophe. What torture for her, when, absorbed as she was by a single, unchanging thought, she had so much need of silence and solitude! But there was something even more terrible than that.

On the first day after her return Frantz resumed his former place; and the glances with which he followed her, the words he addressed to her alone, seemed to her exasperating beyond endurance.

Despite all his shyness and distrust of himself, the poor fellow believed that he had some rights as an accepted and impatient lover, and little Chèbe was obliged to emerge from her dreams to reply to that creditor, and to postpone once more the maturity of his claim.

A day came, however, when indecision ceased to be

possible. She had promised to marry Frantz when he had obtained a good situation; and now an engineer's berth in the South, at the smelting-furnaces of Grand' Combe, was offered to him. That was sufficient for the support of a modest establishment.

There was no way of avoiding the question. She must either keep her promise or invent an excuse for breaking it. But what excuse could she invent?

In that pressing emergency, she thought of Désirée. Although the lame little girl had never confided in her, she knew of her great love for Frantz. Long ago she had detected it, with her coquette's eyes, bright and changing mirrors, which reflected all the thoughts of others without betraying any of her own. It may be that the thought that another woman loved her betrothed had made Frantz's love more endurable to her at first; and, just as we place statues on tombstones to make them appear less sad, Désirée's pretty, little, pale face at the threshold of that uninviting future had made it seem less forbidding to her.

Now it provided her with a simple and honorable pretext for freeing herself from her promise.

"No! I tell you, mamma," she said to Madame Chèbe one day, "I never will consent to make a friend like her unhappy. I should suffer too much from remorse,—poor Désirée! Haven't you noticed how badly she looks since I came home; what a beseeching way she has of looking at me? No, I won't cause her that sorrow; I won't take away her Frantz."

Even while she admired her daughter's generous

spirit, Madame Chèbe looked upon that as a rather exaggerated sacrifice, and remonstrated with her.

"Take care, my child; we aren't rich. A husband like Frantz doesn't turn up every day."

"Very well! then I won't marry at all," declared Sidonie flatly, and, deeming her pretext an excellent one, she clung persistently to it. Nothing could shake her determination, neither the tears shed by Frantz, who was exasperated by her refusal to fulfil her promise, enveloped as it was in vague reasons which she would not even explain to him, nor the entreaties of Risler, in whose ear Madame Chèbe had mysteriously mumbled her daughter's reasons, and who in spite of everything could not but admire such a sacrifice.

"Don't revile her, I tell you! She's an *angel!*" he said to his brother, striving to soothe him.

"Ah! yes, she is an angel," assented Madame Chèbe with a sigh, so that the poor betrayed lover had not even the right to complain. Driven to despair, he determined to leave Paris, and as Grand' Combe seemed too near in his frenzied longing for flight, he asked and obtained an appointment as overseer on the Suez Canal at Ismailia. He went away without knowing, or caring to know aught of, Désirée's love; and yet, when he went to bid her farewell, the dear little cripple looked up into his face with her shy, pretty eyes, in which were plainly written the words:

"I love you, if she does not."

But Frantz Risler did not know how to read what was written in those eyes.

Fortunately, hearts that are accustomed to suffer

have an infinite store of patience. When her friend had gone, the lame girl, with her charming morsel of illusion, inherited from her father and refined by her feminine nature, returned bravely to her work, saying to herself:

"I will wait for him."

And thereafter she spread the wings of her birds to their fullest extent, as if they were all going, one after another, to Ismailia in Egypt. And that was a long distance!

Before sailing from Marseilles, young Risler wrote Sidonie a farewell letter, at once laughable and touching, wherein, mingling the most technical details with the most heartrending adieux, the unhappy engineer declared that he was about to set sail, with a broken heart, on the transport *Sahib*, "a sailing-ship and steamship combined, with engines of fifteen-hundred-horse power," as if he hoped that so considerable a capacity would make an impression on his ungrateful betrothed, and cause her ceaseless remorse. But Sidonie had very different matters on her mind.

She was beginning to be disturbed by Georges's silence. Since she left Savigny she had heard from him only once. All her letters were left unanswered. To be sure, she knew through Risler that Georges was very busy, and that his uncle's death had thrown the management of the factory upon him, imposing upon him a responsibility that was beyond his strength. But to abandon her without a word!

From the window on the landing, where she had resumed her silent observations—for she had so arranged

matters as not to return to Mademoiselle Le Mire—little Chèbe tried to distinguish her lover, watched him as he went to and fro across the yards and among the buildings; and in the afternoon, when it was time for the train to start for Savigny, she saw him enter his carriage to go to his aunt and cousin, who were passing the early months of their period of mourning at the grandfather's château in the country.

All this excited and alarmed her; and the proximity of the factory rendered Georges's avoidance of her even more apparent. To think that by raising her voice a little she could make him turn toward the place where she stood! To think that they were separated only by a wall! And yet, at that moment they were very far apart.

Do you remember, little Chèbe, that unhappy winter evening when the excellent Risler rushed into your parents' room with an extraordinary expression of countenance, exclaiming, "Great news!"?

Great news, indeed! Georges Fromont had just informed him that, in accordance with his uncle's last wishes, he was to marry his cousin Claire, and that, as he was certainly unequal to the task of carrying on the business alone, he had resolved to take him, Risler, for a partner, under the firm name of FROMONT JEUNE AND RISLER AÎNÉ.

How did you succeed, little Chèbe, in maintaining your self-possession when you learned that the factory had eluded your grasp and that another woman had taken your place? What a terrible evening!—Madame Chèbe sat by the table mending; M. Chèbe before the

fire drying his clothes, which were wet through by his having walked a long distance in the rain. Oh! that miserable room, overflowing with gloom and *ennui!* The lamp gave a dim light. The supper, hastily prepared, had left in the room the odor of the poor man's kitchen. And Risler, intoxicated with joy, talking with increasing animation, laid great plans!

All these things tore your heart, and made the treachery still more horrible by the contrast between the riches that eluded your outstretched hand and the ignoble mediocrity in which you were doomed to pass your life.

Sidonie was seriously ill for a long while. As she lay in bed, whenever the window-panes rattled behind the curtains, the unhappy creature fancied that Georges's wedding-coaches were driving through the street; and she had paroxysms of nervous excitement, without words and inexplicable, as if a fever of wrath were consuming her.

At last, time and youthful strength, her mother's care, and, more than all, the attentions of Désirée, who now knew of the sacrifice her friend had made for her, triumphed over the disease. But for a long while Sidonie was very weak, oppressed by a deadly melancholy, by a constant longing to weep, which played havoc with her nervous system.

Sometimes she talked of travelling, of leaving Paris. At other times she insisted that she must enter a convent. Her friends were sorely perplexed, and strove to discover the cause of that singular state of mind, which was even more alarming than her illness; when she

suddenly confessed to her mother the secret of her melancholy.

She loved the elder Risler! She never had dared to whisper it; but it was he whom she had always loved and not Frantz.

This news was a surprise to everybody, to Risler most of all; but little Chébe was so pretty, her eyes were so soft when she glanced at him, that the honest fellow instantly became as fond of her as a fool! Indeed, it may be that love had lain in his heart for a long time without his realizing it.

And that is how it happened that, on the evening of her wedding-day, young Madame Risler, in her white wedding-dress, gazed with a smile of triumph at the window on the landing which had been the narrow setting of ten years of her life. That haughty smile, in which there was a touch of profound pity and of scorn as well, such scorn as a *parvenu* feels for his poor beginnings, was evidently addressed to the poor sickly child whom she fancied she saw up at that window, in the depths of the past and the darkness. It seemed to say to Claire, pointing at the factory:

"What do you say to this little Chébe? She is here at last, you see!"

CHAPTER VI

"MY WIFE'S RECEPTION DAY"

OON. The Marais is breakfasting.

Sitting near the door, on a stone which once served as a horse-block for equestrians, Risler watches with a smile the exit from the factory. He never loses his enjoyment of the outspoken esteem of all these good people whom he knew when he was insignificant and humble like themselves. The "Good-day, Monsieur Risler," uttered by so many different voices, all in the same affectionate tone, warms his heart. The children accost him without fear, the long-bearded designers, half-workmen, half-artists, shake hands with him as they pass, and address him familiarly as "thou." Perhaps there is a little too much familiarity in all this, for the worthy man has not yet begun to realize the prestige and authority of his new station; and there was some one who considered this free-and-easy manner very humiliating. But that some one can not see him at this moment, and the master takes advantage of the fact to bestow a hearty greeting upon the old bookkeeper, Sigismond, who comes out last of all, erect and red-faced, imprisoned in a high collar and bareheaded —whatever the weather—for fear of apoplexy.

He and Risler are fellow-countrymen. They have for each other a profound esteem, dating from their first employment at the factory, from that time, long, long ago, when they breakfasted together at the little creamery on the corner, to which Sigismond Planus goes alone now and selects his refreshment for the day from the slate hanging on the wall.

But stand aside! The carriage of Fromont Jeune drives through the gateway. He has been out on business all the morning; and the partners, as they walk toward the pretty little house in which they both live at the end of the garden, discuss matters of business in a friendly way.

"I have been at Prochasson's," says Fromont. "They showed me some new patterns, pretty ones too, I assure you. We must be on our guard. They are dangerous rivals."

But Risler is not at all anxious. He is strong in his talent, his experience; and then—but this is strictly confidential—he is on the track of a wonderful invention, an improved printing-press, something that—but we shall see. Still talking, they enter the garden, which is as carefully kept as a public park, with round-topped acacias almost as old as the buildings, and magnificent ivies that hide the high, black walls.

Beside Fromont Jeune, Risler Aîné has the appearance of a clerk making his report to his employer. At every step he stops to speak, for his gait is heavy, his mind works slowly, and words have much difficulty in finding their way to his lips. Oh, if he could see the

little flushed face up yonder, behind the window on the second floor, watching everything so attentively!

Madame Risler is waiting for her husband to come to breakfast, and waxes impatient over the good man's moderation. She motions to him with her hand: "Come, come!" but Risler does not notice it. His attention is engrossed by the little Fromont, daughter of Claire and Georges, who is taking a sun-bath, blooming like a flower amid her lace in her nurse's arms. How pretty she is!—"She is your very picture, Madame Chorche."

"Do you think so, my dear Risler? Why, everybody says she looks like her father."

"Yes, a little. But——"

And there they all stand, the father and mother, Risler and the nurse, gravely seeking resemblances in that miniature model of a human being, who stares at them out of her little eyes, blinking with the noise and glare. Sidonie, at her open window, leans out to see what they are doing, and why her husband does not come up.

At that moment Risler has taken the tiny creature in his arms, the whole fascinating bundle of white draperies and light ribbons, and is trying to make it laugh and crow with baby-talk and gestures worthy of a grandfather. How old he looks, poor man! His tall body, which he contorts for the child's amusement, his hoarse voice, which becomes a low growl when he tries to soften it, are absurd and ridiculous.

Above, the wife taps the floor with her foot and mutters between her teeth:

"The idiot!"

At last, weary of waiting, she sends a servant to tell Monsieur that breakfast is served; but the game is so far advanced that Monsieur does not see how he can go away, how he can interrupt these explosions of laughter and little bird-like cries. He succeeds at last, however, in giving the child back to its nurse, and enters the hall, laughing heartily. He is laughing still when he enters the dining-room; but a glance from his wife stops him short.

Sidonie is seated at table before the chafing-dish, already filled. Her martyr-like attitude suggests a determination to be cross.

"Oh! there you are. It's very lucky!"

Risler took his seat, a little ashamed.

"What would you have, my love? That child is so——"

"I have asked you before now not to speak to me in that way. It isn't good form."

"What, not when we're alone?"

"Bah! you will never learn to adapt yourself to our new fortune. And what is the result? No one in this place treats me with any respect. Père Achille hardly touches his hat to me when I pass his lodge. To be sure, I'm not a Fromont, and I haven't a carriage."

"Come, come, little one, you know perfectly well that you can use Madame Chorche's coupé. She always says it is at our disposal."

"How many times must I tell you that I don't choose to be under any obligation to that woman?"

"O Sidonie——"

"Oh! yes, I know, it's all understood. Madame Fromont is the good Lord himself. Every one is forbidden to touch her. And I must make up my mind to be a nobody in my own house, to allow myself to be humiliated, trampled under foot."

"Come, come, little one—"

Poor Risler tries to interpose, to say a word in favor of his dear Madame "Chorche." But he has no tact. This is the worst possible method of effecting a reconciliation; and Sidonie at once bursts forth:

"I tell you that that woman, with all her calm airs, is proud and spiteful. In the first place, she detests me, I know that. So long as I was poor little Sidonie and she could toss me her broken dolls and old clothes, it was all right, but now that I am my own mistress as well as she, it vexes her and humiliates her. Madame gives me advice with a lofty air, and criticises what I do. I did wrong to have a maid. Of course! Wasn't I in the habit of waiting on myself? She never loses a chance to wound me. When I call on her on Wednesdays, you should hear the tone in which she asks me, before everybody, how 'dear Madame Chèbe' is.—Oh! yes. I'm a Chèbe and she's a Fromont. One's as good as the other, in my opinion. My grandfather was a druggist. What was hers? A peasant who got rich by money-lending. I'll tell her so one of these days, if she shows me too much of her pride; and I'll tell her, too, that their little imp, although they don't suspect it, looks just like that old Père Gardinois, and heaven knows he isn't handsome."

"Oh!" exclaims Risler, unable to find words to reply.

"Oh! yes, of course! I advise you to admire their child. She's always ill. She cries all night like a little cat. It keeps me awake. And afterward, through the day, I have mamma's piano and her scales—tra, la la la! If the music were only worth listening to!"

Risler has taken the wise course. He does not say a word until he sees that she is beginning to calm down a little, when he completes the soothing process with compliments.

"How pretty we are to-day! Are we going out soon to make some calls, eh?"

He resorts to this mode of address to avoid the more familiar form, which is so offensive to her.

"No, I am not going to make calls," Sidonie replies with a certain pride. "On the contrary, I expect to receive them. This is my day."

In response to her husband's astounded, bewildered expression she continues:

"Why, yes, this is my day. Madame Fromont has one; I can have one also, I fancy."

"Of course, of course," said honest Risler, looking about with some little uneasiness. "So that's why I saw so many flowers everywhere, on the landing and in the drawing-room."

"Yes, my maid went down to the garden this morning. Did I do wrong? Oh! you don't say so, but I'm sure you think I did wrong. *Dame!* I thought the flowers in the garden belonged to us as much as to the Fromonts."

"Certainly they do—but you—it would have been better perhaps——"

"To ask leave? That's it—to humble myself again for a few paltry chrysanthemums and two or three bits of green. Besides, I didn't make any secret of taking the flowers; and when she comes up a little later——"

"Is she coming? Ah! that's very kind of her."

Sidonie turned upon him indignantly.

"What's that? Kind of her? Upon my word, if she doesn't come, it would be the last straw. When I go every Wednesday to be bored to death in her salon with a crowd of affected, simpering women!"

She did not say that those same Wednesdays of Madame Fromont's were very useful to her, that they were like a weekly journal of fashion, one of those composite little publications in which you are told how to enter and to leave a room, how to bow, how to place flowers in a jardinière and cigars in a case, to say nothing of the engravings, the procession of graceful, faultlessly attired men and women, and the names of the best modistes. Nor did Sidonie add that she had entreated all those friends of Claire's, of whom she spoke so scornfully, to come to see her on her own day, and that the day was selected by them.

Will they come? Will Madame Fromont Jeune insult Madame Risler Aîné by absenting herself on her first Friday? The thought makes her almost feverish with anxiety.

"For heaven's sake, hurry!" she says again and again. "Good heavens! how long you are at your breakfast!"

It is a fact that it is one of honest Risler's ways to eat slowly, and to light his pipe at the table while he

sips his coffee. To-day he must renounce these cherished habits, must leave the pipe in its case because of the smoke, and, as soon as he has swallowed the last mouthful, run hastily and dress, for his wife insists that he must come up during the afternoon and pay his respects to the ladies.

What a sensation in the factory when they see Risler Aîné come in, on a week-day, in a black frock-coat and white cravat!

"Are you going to a wedding, pray?" cries Sigismond, the cashier, behind his grating.

And Risler, not without a feeling of pride, replies:

"This is my wife's reception day!"

Soon everybody in the place knows that it is Sidonie's day; and Père Achille, who takes care of the garden, is not very well pleased to find that the branches of the winter laurels by the gate are broken.

Before taking his seat at the table upon which he draws, in the bright light from the tall windows, Risler has taken off his fine frock-coat, which embarrasses him, and has turned up his clean shirt-sleeves; but the idea that his wife is expecting company preoccupies and disturbs him; and from time to time he puts on his coat and goes up to her.

"Has no one come?" he asks timidly.

"No, Monsieur, no one."

In the beautiful red drawing-room—for they have a drawing-room in red damask, with a *console* between the windows and a pretty table in the centre of the light-flowered carpet—Sidonie has established herself in the attitude of a woman holding a reception, a circle

of chairs of many shapes around her. Here and there are books, reviews, a little work-basket in the shape of a game-bag, with silk tassels, a bunch of violets in a glass vase, and green plants in the jardinières. Everything is arranged exactly as in the Fromonts' apartments on the floor below; but the taste, that invisible line which separates the distinguished from the vulgar, is not yet refined. You would say it was a passable copy of a pretty *genre* picture. The hostess's attire, even, is too new; she looks more as if she were making a call than as if she were at home. In Risler's eyes everything is superb, beyond reproach; he is preparing to say so as he enters the salon, but, in face of his wife's wrathful glance, he checks himself in terror.

"You see, it's four o'clock," she says, pointing to the clock with an angry gesture. "No one will come. But I take it especially ill of Claire not to come up. She is at home—I am sure of it—I can hear her."

Indeed, ever since noon, Sidonie has listened intently to the slightest sounds on the floor below, the child's crying, the closing of doors. Risler attempts to go down again in order to avoid a renewal of the conversation at breakfast; but his wife will not allow him to do so. The very least he can do is to stay with her when everybody else abandons her, and so he remains there, at a loss what to say, rooted to the spot, like those people who dare not move during a storm for fear of attracting the lightning. Sidonie moves excitedly about, going in and out of the salon, changing the position of a chair, putting it back again, looking at herself as she passes the mirror, and ringing for her

maid to send her to ask Père Achille if no one has inquired for her. That Père Achille is such a spiteful creature! Perhaps when people have come, he has said that she was out.

But no, the *concierge* has not seen any one.

Silence and consternation. Sidonie is standing at the window on the left, Risler at the one on the right. From there they can see the little garden, where the darkness is gathering, and the black smoke which the chimney emits beneath the lowering clouds. Sigismond's window is the first to show a light on the ground floor; the cashier trims his lamp himself with painstaking care, and his tall shadow passes in front of the flame and bends double behind the grating. Sidonie's wrath is diverted a moment by these familiar details.

Suddenly a small coupé drives into the garden and stops in front of the door. At last some one is coming. In that pretty whirl of silk and flowers and jet and flounces and furs, as it runs quickly up the step, Sidonie has recognized one of the most fashionable frequenters of the Fromont salon, the wife of a wealthy dealer in bronzes. What an honor to receive a call from such an one! Quick, quick! the family takes its position, Monsieur in front of the hearth, Madame in an easy-chair, carelessly turning the leaves of a magazine. Wasted pose! The fair caller did not come to see Sidonie; she has stopped at the floor below.

Ah! if Madame Georges could hear what her neighbor says of her and her friends!

At that moment the door opens and "Mademoiselle

Planus" is announced. She is the cashier's sister, a poor old maid, humble and modest, who has made it her duty to make this call upon the wife of her brother's employer, and who is amazed at the warm welcome she receives. She is surrounded and made much of. "How kind of you to come! Draw up to the fire." They overwhelm her with attentions and show great interest in her slightest word. Honest Risler's smiles are as warm as his thanks. Sidonie herself displays all her fascinations, overjoyed to exhibit herself in her glory to one who was her equal in the old days, and to reflect that the other, in the room below, must hear that she has had callers. So she makes as much noise as possible, moving chairs, pushing the table around; and when the lady takes her leave, dazzled, enchanted, bewildered, she escorts her to the landing with a great rustling of flounces, and calls to her in a very loud voice, leaning over the rail, that she is at home every Friday. "You understand, every Friday."

Now it is dark. The two great lamps in the salon are lighted. In the adjoining room they hear the servant laying the table. It is all over. Madame Fromont Jeune will not come.

Sidonie is pale with rage.

"Just fancy, that minx can't come up eighteen steps! No doubt Madame thinks we're not grand enough for her. Ah! but I'll have my revenge."

As she pours forth her wrath in unjust words, her voice becomes coarse, takes on the intonations of the faubourg, an accent of the common people which betrays the ex-apprentice of Mademoiselle Le Mire.

Risler is unlucky enough to make a remark.

"Who knows? Perhaps the child is ill."

She turns upon him in a fury, as if she would like to bite him.

"Will you hold your tongue about that brat? After all, it's your fault that this has happened to me. You don't know how to make people treat me with respect."

And as she closed the door of her bedroom violently, making the globes on the lamps tremble, as well as all the knick-knacks on the étagères, Risler, left alone, stands motionless in the centre of the salon, looking with an air of consternation at his white cuffs, his broad patent-leather shoes, and mutters mechanically:

"My wife's reception day!"

CHAPTER VII

THE TRUE PEARL AND THE FALSE

HAT can be the matter? What have I done to her?" Claire Fromont very often wondered when she thought of Sidonie.

She was entirely ignorant of what had formerly taken place between her friend and Georges at Savigny. Her own life was so upright, her mind so pure, that it was impossible for her to divine the jealous, mean-spirited ambition that had grown up by her side within the past fifteen years. And yet the enigmatical expression in that pretty face as it smiled upon her gave her a vague feeling of uneasiness which she could not understand. An affectation of politeness, strange enough between friends, was suddenly succeeded by an ill-dissembled anger, a cold, stinging tone, in presence of which Claire was as perplexed as by a difficult problem. Sometimes, too, a singular presentiment, the ill-defined intuition of a great misfortune, was mingled with her uneasiness; for all women have in some degree a kind of second sight, and, even in the most innocent, ignorance of evil is suddenly illumined by visions of extraordinary lucidity.

From time to time, as the result of a conversation

somewhat longer than usual, or of one of those unexpected meetings when faces taken by surprise allow their real thoughts to be seen, Madame Fromont reflected seriously concerning this strange little Sidonie; but the active, urgent duties of life, with its accompaniment of affections and preoccupations, left her no time for dwelling upon such trifles.

To all women comes a time when they encounter such sudden windings in the road that their whole horizon changes and all their points of view become transformed.

Had Claire been a young girl, the falling away of that friendship bit by bit, as if torn from her by an unkindly hand, would have been a source of great regret to her. But she had lost her father, the object of her greatest, her only youthful affection; then she had married. The child had come, with its thrice welcome demands upon her every moment. Moreover, she had with her her mother, almost in her dotage, still stupefied by her husband's tragic death. In a life so fully occupied, Sidonie's caprices received but little attention; and it had hardly occurred to Claire Fromont to be surprised at her marriage to Risler. He was clearly too old for her; but, after all, what difference did it make, if they loved each other?

As for being vexed because little Chèbe had attained that lofty position, had become almost her equal, her superior nature was incapable of such pettiness. On the contrary, she would have been glad with all her heart to know that that young wife, whose home was so near her own, who lived the same life, so to speak,

and had been her playmate in childhood, was happy and highly esteemed. Being most kindly disposed toward her, she tried to teach her, to instruct her in the ways of society, as one might instruct an attractive provincial, who fell but little short of being altogether charming.

Advice is not readily accepted by one pretty young woman from another. When Madame Fromont gave a grand dinner-party, she took Madame Risler to her bedroom, and said to her, smiling frankly in order not to vex her: "You have put on too many jewels, my dear. And then, you know, with a high dress one doesn't wear flowers in the hair." Sidonie blushed, and thanked her friend, but wrote down an additional grievance against her in the bottom of her heart.

In Claire's circle her welcome was decidedly cold. The Faubourg Saint-Germain has its pretensions; but do not imagine that the Marais has none! Those wives and daughters of mechanics, of wealthy manufacturers, knew little Chèbe's story; indeed, they would have guessed it simply by her manner of making her appearance and by her demeanor among them.

Sidonie's efforts were unavailing. She retained the manners of a shopgirl. Her slightly artificial amiability, sometimes too humble, was as unpleasant as the spurious elegance of the shop; and her disdainful attitudes recalled the superb airs of the head saleswomen in the great drygoods establishments, arrayed in black silk gowns, which they take off in the dressing-room when they go away at night—who stare with an imposing air, from the vantage-point of their mountains

of curls, at the poor creatures who venture to discuss prices.

She felt that she was being examined and criticised, and her modesty was compelled to place itself upon a war footing. Of the names mentioned in her presence, the amusements, the entertainments, the books of which they talked to her, she knew nothing. Claire did her best to help her, to keep her on the surface, with a friendly hand always outstretched; but many of these ladies thought Sidonie pretty; that was enough to make them bear her a grudge for seeking admission to their circle. Others, proud of their husbands' standing and of their wealth, could not invent enough unspoken affronts and patronizing phrases to humiliate the little *parvenue*.

Sidonie included them all in a single phrase: "Claire's friends—that is to say, my enemies!" But she was seriously incensed against but one.

The two partners had no suspicion of what was taking place between their wives. Risler, continually engrossed in his press, sometimes remained at his draughting-table until midnight. Fromont passed his days abroad, lunched at his club, was almost never at the factory. He had his reasons for that.

Sidonie's proximity disturbed him. His capricious passion for her, that passion that he had sacrificed to his uncle's last wishes, recurred too often to his memory with all the regret one feels for the irreparable; and, conscious that he was weak, he fled. His was a pliable nature, without sustaining purpose, intelligent enough to appreciate his failings, too weak to guide itself. On

the evening of Risler's wedding—he had been married but a few months himself—he had experienced anew, in that woman's presence, all the emotion of the stormy evening at Savigny. Thereafter, without self-examination, he avoided seeing her again or speaking with her. Unfortunately, as they lived in the same house, as their wives saw each other ten times a day, chance sometimes brought them together; and this strange thing happened—that the husband, wishing to remain virtuous, deserted his home altogether and sought distraction elsewhere.

Claire was not astonished that it was so. She had become accustomed, during her father's lifetime, to the constant comings and goings of a business life; and during her husband's absences, zealously performing her duties as wife and mother, she invented long tasks, occupations of all sorts, walks for the child, prolonged, peaceful tarryings in the sunlight, from which she would return home, overjoyed with the little one's progress, deeply impressed with the gleeful enjoyment of all infants in the fresh air, but with a touch of their radiance in the depths of her serious eyes.

Sidonie also went out a great deal. It often happened, toward night, that Georges's carriage, driving through the gateway, would compel Madame Risler to step hastily aside as she was returning in a gorgeous costume from a triumphal promenade. The boulevard, the shop-windows, the purchases, made after long deliberation as if to enjoy to the full the pleasure of purchasing, detained her very late. They would exchange a bow, a cold glance at the foot of the stair-

case; and Georges would hurry into his apartments, as into a place of refuge, concealing beneath a flood of caresses, bestowed upon the child his wife held out to him, the sudden emotion that had seized him.

Sidonie, for her part, seemed to have forgotten everything, and to have retained no other feeling but contempt for that weak, cowardly creature. Moreover, she had many other things to think about.

Her husband had just had a piano placed in her red salon, between the windows.

After long hesitation she had decided to learn to sing, thinking that it was rather late to begin to play the piano; and twice a week Madame Dobson, a pretty, sentimental blonde, came to give her lessons from twelve o'clock to one. In the silence of the neighborhood the *a—a—a* and *o—o—o*, persistently prolonged, repeated again and again, with windows open, gave the factory the atmosphere of a boarding-school.

And it was in reality a schoolgirl who was practising these exercises, an inexperienced, wavering little soul, full of unconfessed longings, with everything to learn and to find out in order to become a real woman. But her ambition confined itself to a superficial aspect of things.

"Claire Fromont plays the piano; I will sing. She is considered a refined and distinguished woman, and I intend that people shall say the same of me."

Without a thought of improving her education, Sidonie passed her life running about among milliners and dressmakers. "What are people going to wear this winter?" was her cry. She was attracted by the

gorgeous displays in the shop-windows, by everything that caught the eye of the passers-by.

The one thing that Sidonie envied Claire more than all else was the child, the luxurious plaything, beribboned from the curtains of its cradle to its nurse's cap. She did not think of the sweet, maternal duties, demanding patience and self-abnegation, of the long rockings when sleep would not come, of the laughing awakenings sparkling with fresh water. No! she saw in the child naught but the daily walk. It is such a pretty sight, the little bundle of finery, with floating ribbons and long feathers, that follows young mothers through the crowded streets.

When she wanted company she had only her parents or her husband. She preferred to go out alone. The excellent Risler had such an absurd way of showing his love for her, playing with her as if she were a doll, pinching her chin and her cheek, capering about her, crying, "Hou! hou!" or staring at her with his great, soft eyes like an affectionate and grateful dog. That senseless love, which made of her a toy, a mantel ornament, made her ashamed. As for her parents, they were an embarrassment to her in presence of the people she wished to know, and immediately after her marriage she almost got rid of them by hiring a little house for them at Montrouge. That step had cut short the frequent invasions of Monsieur Chèbe and his long frock-coat, and the endless visits of good Madame Chèbe, in whom the return of comfortable circumstances had revived former habits of gossip and of indolence.

Sidonie would have been very glad to rid herself of the Delobelles in the same way, for their proximity annoyed her. But the Marais was a central location for the old actor, because the boulevard theatres were so near; then, too, Désirée, like all sedentary persons, clung to the familiar outlook, and her gloomy courtyard, dark at four o'clock in winter, seemed to her like a friend, like a familiar face which the sun lighted up at times as if it were smiling at her. As she was unable to get rid of them, Sidonie had adopted the course of ceasing to visit them.

In truth, her life would have been lonely and depressing enough, had it not been for the distractions which Claire Fromont procured for her. Each time added fuel to her wrath. She would say to herself:

"Must everything come to me through her?"

And when, just at dinner-time, a box at the theatre or an invitation for the evening was sent to her from the floor below, while she was dressing, overjoyed at the opportunity to exhibit herself, she thought of nothing but crushing her rival. But such opportunities became more rare as Claire's time was more and more engrossed by her child. When Grandfather Gardinois came to Paris, however, he never failed to bring the two families together. The old peasant's gayety, for its freer expansion, needed little Sidonie, who did not take alarm at his jests. He would take them all four to dine at Philippe's, his favorite restaurant, where he knew all the patrons, the waiters and the steward, would spend a lot of money, and then take them to a reserved box at the Opéra-Comique or the Palais-Royal.

At the theatre he laughed uproariously, talked familiarly with the box-openers, as he did with the waiters at Philippe's, loudly demanded footstools for the ladies, and when the performance was over insisted on having the topcoats and fur wraps of his party first of all, as if he were the only three-million *parvenu* in the audience.

For these somewhat vulgar entertainments, from which her husband usually excused himself, Claire, with her usual tact, dressed very plainly and attracted no attention. Sidonie, on the contrary, in all her finery, in full view of the boxes, laughed with all her heart at the grandfather's anecdotes, happy to have descended from the second or third gallery, her usual place in the old days, to that lovely proscenium box, adorned with mirrors, with a velvet rail that seemed made expressly for her light gloves, her ivory opera-glass, and her spangled fan. The tawdry glitter of the theatre, the red and gold of the hangings, were genuine splendor to her. She bloomed among them like a pretty paper flower in a filigree jardinière.

One evening, at the performance of a successful play at the Palais-Royal, among all the noted women who were present, painted celebrities wearing microscopic hats and armed with huge fans, their rouge-besmeared faces standing out from the shadow of the boxes in the gaudy setting of their gowns, Sidonie's behavior, her toilette, the peculiarities of her laugh and her expression attracted much attention. All the opera-glasses in the hall, guided by the magnetic current that is so powerful under the great chandeliers, were turned one by one

upon the box in which she sat. Claire soon became embarrassed, and modestly insisted upon changing places with her husband, who, unluckily, had accompanied them that evening.

Georges, youthful and elegant, sitting beside Sidonie, seemed her natural companion, while Risler Aîné, always so placid and self-effacing, seemed in his proper place beside Claire Fromont, who in her dark clothes suggested the respectable woman *incog.* at the Bal de l'Opéra.

Upon leaving the theatre each of the partners offered his arm to his neighbor. A box-opener, speaking to Sidonie, referred to Georges as "your husband," and the little woman beamed with delight.

"Your husband!"

That simple phrase was enough to upset her and set in motion a multitude of evil currents in the depths of her heart. As they passed through the corridors and the foyer, she watched Risler and Madame "Chorche" walking in front of them. Claire's refinement of manner seemed to her to be vulgarized and annihilated by Risler's shuffling gait. "How ugly he must make me look when we are walking together!" she said to herself. And her heart beat fast as she thought what a charming, happy, admired couple they would have made, she and this Georges Fromont, whose arm was trembling beneath her own.

Thereupon, when the blue-lined carriage drove up to the door of the theatre, she began to reflect, for the first time, that, when all was said, Claire had stolen her place and that she would be justified in trying to recover it.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BREWERY ON THE RUE BLONDEL

FTER his marriage Risler had given up the brewery. Sidonie would have been glad to have him leave the house in the evening for a fashionable club, a resort of wealthy, well-dressed men; but the idea of his returning, amid clouds of pipe-smoke, to his friends of earlier days, Sigismond, Delobelle, and her own father, humiliated her and made her unhappy. So he ceased to frequent the place; and that was something of a sacrifice. It was almost a glimpse of his native country, that brewery situated in a remote corner of Paris. The infrequent carriages, the high, barred windows of the ground floors, the odor of fresh drugs, of pharmaceutical preparations, imparted to that narrow little Rue Blondel a vague resemblance to certain streets in Basle or Zurich.

The brewery was managed by a Swiss and crowded with men of that nationality. When the door was opened, through the smoke-laden atmosphere, dense with the accents of the North, one had a vision of a vast, low room with hams hanging from the rafters, casks of beer standing in a row, the floor ankle-deep

with sawdust, and on the counter great salad-bowls filled with potatoes as red as chestnuts, and baskets of pretzels fresh from the oven, their golden knots sprinkled with white salt.

For twenty years Risler had had his pipe there, a long pipe marked with his name in the rack reserved for the regular customers. He had also his table, at which he was always joined by several discreet, quiet compatriots, who listened admiringly, but without comprehending them, to the endless harangues of Chèbe and Delobelle. When Risler ceased his visits to the brewery, the two last-named worthies likewise turned their backs upon it, for several excellent reasons. In the first place, M. Chèbe now lived a considerable distance away. Thanks to the generosity of his children, the dream of his whole life was realized at last.

"When I am rich," the little man used to say in his cheerless rooms in the Marais, "I will have a house of my own, at the gates of Paris, almost in the country, a little garden which I will plant and water myself. That will be better for my health than all the excitement of the capital."

Well, he had his house now, but he did not enjoy himself in it. It was at Montrouge, on the road that runs around the city. "A small châlet, with garden," said the advertisement, printed on a placard which gave an almost exact idea of the dimensions of the property. The papers were new and of rustic design, the paint perfectly fresh; a water-butt planted beside a vine-clad arbor played the part of a pond. In addition to all these advantages, only a hedge separated

this paradise from another "châlet with garden" of precisely the same description, occupied by Sigismond Planus the cashier, and his sister. To Madame Chèbe that was a most precious circumstance. When the good woman was bored, she would take a stock of knitting and darning and go and sit in the old maid's arbor, dazzling her with the tale of her past splendors. Unluckily, her husband had not the same source of distraction.

However, everything went well at first. It was midsummer, and M. Chèbe, always in his shirt-sleeves, was busily employed in getting settled. Each nail to be driven in the house was the subject of leisurely reflections, of endless discussions. It was the same with the garden. He had determined at first to make an English garden of it, lawns always green, winding paths shaded by shrubbery. But the trouble of it was that it took so long for the shrubbery to grow.

"I have a mind to make an orchard of it," said the impatient little man.

And thenceforth he dreamed of nothing but vegetables, long lines of beans, and peach-trees against the wall. He dug for whole mornings, knitting his brows in a preoccupied way and wiping his forehead ostentatiously before his wife, so that she would say:

"For heaven's sake, do rest a bit—you're killing yourself."

The result was that the garden was a mixture: flowers and fruit, park and kitchen garden; and whenever he went into Paris M. Chèbe was careful to decorate his buttonhole with a rose from his rose-bushes.

While the fine weather lasted, the good people did not weary of admiring the sunsets behind the fortifications, the long days, the bracing country air. Sometimes, in the evening, when the windows were open, they sang duets; and in presence of the stars in heaven, which began to twinkle simultaneously with the lanterns on the railway around the city, Ferdinand would become poetical. But when the rain came and he could not go out, what misery! Madame Chèbe, a thorough Parisian, sighed for the narrow streets of the Marais, her expeditions to the market of Blancs-Manteaux, and to the shops of the quarter.

As she sat by the window, her usual place for sewing and observation, she would gaze at the damp little garden, where the volubilis and the nasturtiums, stripped of their blossoms, were dropping away from the lattices with an air of exhaustion, at the long, straight line of the grassy slope of the fortifications, still fresh and green, and, a little farther on, at the corner of a street, the office of the Paris omnibuses, with all the points of their route inscribed in enticing letters on the green walls. Whenever one of the omnibuses lumbered away on its journey, she followed it with her eyes, as a government clerk at Cayenne or Nouméa gazes after the steamer about to return to France; she made the trip with it, knew just where it would stop, at what point it would lurch around a corner, grazing the shop-windows with its wheels.

As a prisoner, M. Chèbe became a terrible trial. He could not work in the garden. On Sundays the fortifications were deserted; he could no longer strut about

among the workingmen's families dining on the grass, and pass from group to group in a neighborly way, his feet encased in embroidered slippers, with the authoritative demeanor of a wealthy landowner of the vicinity. This he missed more than anything else, consumed as he was by the desire to make people think about him. So that, having nothing to do, having no one to pose before, no one to listen to his schemes, his stories, the anecdote of the accident to the Duc d'Orléans—a similar accident had happened to him in his youth, you remember—the unfortunate Ferdinand overwhelmed his wife with reproaches.

"Your daughter banishes us—your daughter is ashamed of us——"

She heard nothing but that "Your daughter—your daughter—your daughter——" For, in his anger with Sidonie, he denied her, throwing upon his wife the whole responsibility for that monstrous and unnatural child. It was a genuine relief for poor Madame Chèbe when her husband took an omnibus at the office to go and hunt up Delobelle—whose hours for lounging were always at his disposal—and pour into his bosom all his rancor against his son-in-law and his daughter.

The illustrious Delobelle also bore Risler a grudge, and freely said of him: "He is a dastard."

The great man had hoped to form an integral part of the new household, to be the organizer of festivities, the *arbiter elegantiarum*. Instead of which, Sidonie received him very coldly, and Risler no longer even took him to the brewery. However, the actor did not complain too loud, and whenever he met his friend he

overwhelmed him with attentions and flattery; for he had need of him.

Weary of awaiting the discerning manager, seeing that the engagement he had longed for so many years did not come, it had occurred to Delobelle to purchase a theatre and manage it himself. He counted upon Risler for the funds. Opportunely enough, a small theatre on the boulevard happened to be for sale, as a result of the failure of its manager. Delobelle mentioned it to Risler, at first very vaguely, in a wholly hypothetical form—"There would be a good chance to make a fine stroke." Risler listened with his usual phlegm, saying, "Indeed, it would be a good thing for you." And to a more direct suggestion, not daring to answer, "No," he took refuge behind such phrases as "I will see"—"Perhaps later"—"I don't say no"—and finally uttered the unlucky words "I must see the estimates."

For a whole week the actor had delved away at plans and figures, seated between his wife and daughter, who watched him in admiration, and intoxicated themselves with this latest dream. The people in the house said, "Monsieur Delobelle is going to buy a theatre." On the boulevard, in the actors' cafés, nothing was talked of but this transaction. Delobelle did not conceal the fact that he had found some one to advance the funds; the result being that he was surrounded by a crowd of unemployed actors, old comrades who tapped him familiarly on the shoulder and recalled themselves to his recollection—"You know, old boy." He promised engagements, breakfasted at the café, wrote letters

there, greeted those who entered with the tips of his fingers, held very animated conversations in corners; and already two threadbare authors had read to him a drama in seven tableaux, which was "exactly what he wanted" for his opening piece. He talked about "my theatre!" and his letters were addressed, "Monsieur Delobelle, Manager."

When he had composed his prospectus and made his estimates, he went to the factory to see Risler, who, being very busy, made an appointment to meet him in the Rue Blondel; and that same evening, Delobelle, being the first to arrive at the brewery, established himself at their old table, ordered a pitcher of beer and two glasses, and waited. He waited a long while, with his eye on the door, trembling with impatience. Whenever any one entered, the actor turned his head. He had spread his papers on the table, and pretended to be reading them, with animated gestures and movements of the head and lips.

It was a magnificent opportunity, unique in its way. He already fancied himself acting—for that was the main point—acting, in a theatre of his own, *rôles* written expressly for him, to suit his talents, in which he would produce all the effect of——

Suddenly the door opened, and M. Chèbe made his appearance amid the pipe-smoke. He was as surprised and annoyed to find Delobelle there as Delobelle himself was by his coming. He had written to his son-in-law that morning that he wished to speak with him on a matter of very serious importance, and that he would meet him at the brewery. It was an affair

of honor, entirely between themselves, from man to man. The real fact concerning this affair of honor was that M. Chèbe had given notice of his intention to leave the little house at Montrouge, and had hired a shop with an entresol in the Rue du Mail, in the midst of a business district. A shop? Yes, indeed! And now he was a little alarmed regarding his hasty step, anxious to know how his son-in-law would take it, especially as the shop cost much more than the Montrouge house, and there were some repairs to be made at the outset. As he had long been acquainted with his son-in-law's kindness of heart, M. Chèbe had determined to appeal to him at once, hoping to lead him into his game and throw upon him the responsibility for this domestic change. Instead of Risler he found Delobelle.

They looked askance at each other, with an unfriendly eye, like two dogs meeting beside the same dish. Each divined for whom the other was waiting, and they did not try to deceive each other.

"Isn't my son-in-law here?" asked M. Chèbe, eying the documents spread over the table, and emphasizing the words "my son-in-law," to indicate that Risler belonged to him and to nobody else.

"I am waiting for him," Delobelle replied, gathering up his papers.

He pressed his lips together, as he added with a dignified, mysterious, but always theatrical air:

"It is a matter of very great importance."

"So is mine," declared M. Chèbe, his three hairs standing erect like a porcupine's quills.

As he spoke, he took his seat on the bench beside Delobelle, ordered a pitcher and two glasses as the former had done, then sat erect with his hands in his pockets and his back against the wall, waiting in his turn. The two empty glasses in front of them, intended for the same absentee, seemed to be hurling defiance at each other.

But Risler did not come.

The two men, drinking in silence, lost their patience and fidgeted about on the bench, each hoping that the other would tire of waiting.

At last their ill-humor overflowed, and naturally poor Risler received the whole flood.

"What an outrage to keep a man of my years waiting so long!" began M. Chèbe, who never mentioned his great age except upon such occasions.

"I believe, on my word, that he is making sport of us," replied M. Delobelle.

And the other:

"No doubt Monsieur had company to dinner."

"And such company!" scornfully exclaimed the illustrious actor, in whose mind bitter memories were awakened.

"The fact is——" continued M. Chèbe.

They drew closer to each other and talked. The hearts of both were full in respect to Sidonie and Risler. They opened the flood-gates. That Risler, with all his good-nature, was an egotist pure and simple, a *parvenu*. They laughed at his accent and his bearing, they mimicked certain of his peculiarities. Then they talked about his household, and, lowering their voices,

they became confidential, laughed familiarly together, were friends once more.

M. Chèbe went very far: "Let him beware! he has been foolish enough to send the father and mother away from their daughter; if anything happens to her, he can't blame us. A girl who hasn't her parents' example before her eyes, you understand——"

"Certainly—certainly," said Delobelle; "especially as Sidonie has become a great flirt. However, what can you expect? He will get no more than he deserves. No man of his age ought to—— Hush! here he is!"

Risler had entered the room, and was walking toward them, distributing hand-shakes all along the benches.

There was a moment of embarrassment between the three friends. Risler excused himself as well as he could. He had been detained at home; Sidonie had company—Delobelle touched M. Chèbe's foot under the table—and, as he spoke, the poor man, decidedly perplexed by the two empty glasses that awaited him, wondered in front of which of the two he ought to take his seat.

Delobelle was generous.

"You have business together, Messieurs; do not let me disturb you."

He added in a low tone, winking at Risler:

"I have the papers."

"The papers?" echoed Risler, in a bewildered tone.

"The estimates," whispered the actor.

Thereupon, with a great show of discretion, he with-

drew within himself, and resumed the reading of his documents, his head in his hands and his fingers in his ears.

The two others conversed by his side, first in undertones, then louder, for M. Chèbe's shrill, piercing voice could not long be subdued.—He wasn't old enough to be buried, deuce take it!—He should have died of *ennui* at Montrouge.—What he must have was the bustle and life of the Rue de Mail or the Rue du Sentier—of the business districts.

"Yes, but a shop? Why a shop?" Risler timidly ventured to ask.

"Why a shop?—why a shop?" repeated M. Chèbe, red as an Easter egg, and raising his voice to its highest pitch. "Why, because I'm a merchant, Monsieur Risler, a merchant and son of a merchant. Oh! I see what you're coming at. I have no business. But whose fault is it? If the people who shut me up at Montrouge, at the gates of Bicêtre, like a paralytic, had had the good sense to furnish me with the money to start in business——" At that point Risler succeeded in silencing him, and thereafter only snatches of the conversation could be heard:—"a more convenient shop—high ceilings—better air—future plans—enormous business—I will speak when the time comes—many people will be astonished."

As he caught these fragments of sentences, Delobelle became more and more absorbed in his estimates, presenting the eloquent back of the man who is not listening. Risler, sorely perplexed, slowly sipped his beer from time to time to keep himself in countenance.

At last, when M. Chèbe had grown calm, and with good reason, his son-in-law turned with a smile to the illustrious Delobelle, and met the stern, impassive glance which seemed to say, "Well! what of me?"

"Ah! *Mon Dieu!*—that is true," thought the poor fellow.

Changing at once his chair and his glass, he took his seat opposite the actor. But M. Chèbe had not Delobelle's courtesy. Instead of discreetly moving away, he took his glass and joined the others, so that the great man, unwilling to speak before him, solemnly replaced his documents in his pocket a second time, saying to Risler:

"We will talk this over later."

Very much later, in truth, for M. Chèbe had reflected:

"My son-in-law is so good-natured! If I leave him with this swindler, who knows what he may get out of him?"

And he remained on guard. The actor was furious. It was impossible to postpone the matter to some other day, for Risler told them that he was going the next day to spend the next month at Savigny.

"A month at Savigny!" exclaimed M. Chèbe, incensed at the thought of his son-in-law escaping him. "How about business?"

"Oh! I shall come to Paris every day with Georges. Monsieur Gardinois is very anxious to see his little Sidonie."

M. Chèbe shook his head. He considered it very imprudent. Business is business. A man ought to be

on the spot, always on the spot, in the breach. Who could say?—the factory might take fire in the night. And he repeated sententiously: "The eye of the master, my dear fellow, the eye of the master," while the actor—who was little better pleased by this intended departure—opened his great eyes, giving them an expression at once cunning and authoritative, the veritable expression of the eye of the master.

At last, about midnight, the last Montrouge omnibus bore away the tyrannical father-in-law, and Delobelle was able to speak.

"Let us first look at the prospectus," he said, preferring not to attack the question of figures at once; and with his eyeglasses on his nose, he began, in a declamatory tone, always upon the stage: "When one considers coolly the decrepitude which dramatic art has reached in France, when one measures the distance that separates the stage of Molière——"

There were several pages like that. Risler listened, puffing at his pipe, afraid to stir, for the reader looked at him every moment over his eyeglasses, to watch the effect of his phrases. Unfortunately, right in the middle of the prospectus, the café closed. The lights were extinguished; they must go.—And the estimates?—It was agreed that they should read them as they walked along. They stopped at every gaslight. The actor displayed his figures. So much for the hall, so much for the lighting, so much for poor-rates, so much for the actors. On that question of the actors he was firm.

"The best point about the affair," he said, "is that we shall have no leading man to pay. Our leading

man will be Bibi." (When Delobelle mentioned himself, he commonly called himself Bibi.) "A leading man is paid twenty thousand francs, and as we have none to pay, it's just as if you put twenty thousand francs in your pocket. Tell me, isn't that true?"

Risler did not reply. He had the constrained manner, the wandering eyes of the man whose thoughts are elsewhere. The reading of the estimates being concluded, Delobelle, dismayed to find that they were drawing near the corner of the Rue des Vieilles-Haudriettes, put the question squarely. Would Risler advance the money, yes or no?

"Well!—no," said Risler, inspired by heroic courage, which he owed principally to the proximity of the factory and to the thought that the welfare of his family was at stake.

Delobelle was astounded. He had believed that the business was as good as done, and he stared at his companion, intensely agitated, his eyes as big as saucers, and rolling his papers in his hand.

"No," Risler continued, "I can't do what you ask, for this reason."

Thereupon the worthy man, slowly, with his usual heaviness of speech, explained that he was not rich. Although a partner in a wealthy house, he had no available funds. Georges and he drew a certain sum from the concern each month; then, when they struck a balance at the end of the year they divided the profits. It had cost him a good deal to begin housekeeping: all his savings. It was still four months before the inventory. Where was he to obtain the 30,000 francs

to be paid down at once for the theatre? And then, beyond all that, the affair could not be successful.

"Why, it must succeed. Bibi will be there!" As he spoke, poor Bibi drew himself up to his full height; but Risler was determined, and all Bibi's arguments met the same refusal—"Later, in two or three years, I don't say something may not be done."

The actor fought for a long time, yielding his ground inch by inch. He proposed revising his estimates. The thing might be done cheaper. "It would still be too dear for me," Risler interrupted. "My name doesn't belong to me. It is a part of the firm. I have no right to pledge it. Imagine my going into bankruptcy!" His voice trembled as he uttered the word.

"But if everything is in my name," said Delobelle, who had no superstition. He tried everything, invoked the sacred interests of art, went so far as to mention the fascinating actresses whose alluring glances—Risler laughed aloud.

"Come, come, you rascal! What's that you're saying? You forget that we're both married men, and that it is very late and our wives are expecting us.—No ill-will, eh?—This is not a refusal, you understand.—By the way, come and see me after the inventory. We will talk it over again. Ah! there's Père Achille putting out his gas.—I must go in. Good-night."

It was after one o'clock when the actor returned home. The two women were waiting for him, working as usual, but with a sort of feverish activity which was strange to them. Every moment the great scissors that Mamma Delobelle used to cut the brass wire were

seized with strange fits of trembling, and Désirée's little fingers, as she mounted an insect, moved so fast that it made one dizzy to watch them. Even the long feathers of the little birds scattered about on the table before her seemed more brilliant, more richly colored, than on other days. It was because a lovely visitor named Hope had called upon them that evening. She had made the tremendous effort required to climb five dark flights of stairs, and had opened the door of the little room to cast a luminous glance therein. However much you may have been deceived in life, those magic gleams always dazzle you.

"Oh! if your father could only succeed!" said Mamma Delobelle from time to time, as if to sum up a whole world of happy thoughts to which her reverie abandoned itself.

"He will succeed, mamma, never fear. Monsieur Risler is so kind, I will answer for him. And Sidonie is very fond of us, too, although since she was married she does seem to neglect her old friends a little. But we must make allowance for the difference in our positions. Besides, I never shall forget what she did for me."

And, at the thought of what Sidonie had done for her, the little cripple applied herself with even more feverish energy to her work. Her electrified fingers moved with redoubled swiftness. You would have said that they were running after some fleeing, elusive thing, like happiness, for example, or the love of some one who loves you not.

"What was it that she did for you?" her mother

would naturally have asked her; but at that moment she was only slightly interested in what her daughter said. She was thinking exclusively of her great man.

"No! do you think so, my dear? Just suppose your father should have a theatre of his own and act again as in former days. You don't remember; you were too small then. But he had tremendous success, no end of recalls. One night, at Alençon, the subscribers to the theatre gave him a gold wreath. Ah! he was a brilliant man in those days, so light-hearted, so glad to be alive. Those who see him now don't know him, poor man, misfortune has changed him so. Oh, well! I feel sure that all that's necessary is a little success to make him young and happy again. And then there's money to be made managing theatres. The manager at Nantes had a carriage. Can you imagine us with a carriage? Can you imagine it, I say? That's what would be good for you. You could go out, leave your armchair once in a while. Your father would take us into the country. You would see the water and the trees you have had such a longing to see."

"Oh! the trees," murmured the pale little recluse, trembling from head to foot.

At that moment the street door of the house was closed violently, and M. Delobelle's measured step echoed in the vestibule. There was a moment of speechless, breathless anguish. The women dared not look at each other, and mamma's great scissors trembled so that they cut the wire crooked.

The poor devil had unquestionably received a terrible blow. His illusions crushed, the humiliation of a

refusal, the jests of his comrades, the bill at the café where he had breakfasted on credit during the whole period of his managership, a bill which must be paid—all these things occurred to him in the silence and gloom of the five flights he had to climb. His heart was torn. Even so, the actor's nature was so strong in him that he deemed it his duty to envelop his distress, genuine as it was, in a conventional tragic mask.

As he entered, he paused, cast an ominous glance around the work-room, at the table covered with work, his little supper waiting for him in a corner, and the two dear, anxious faces looking up at him with glistening eyes. He stood a full minute without speaking—and you know how long a minute's silence seems on the stage; then he took three steps forward, sank upon a low chair beside the table, and exclaimed in a hissing voice:

"Ah! I am accursed!"

At the same time he dealt the table such a terrible blow with his fist that the "birds and insects for ornament" flew to the four corners of the room. His terrified wife rose and timidly approached him, while Désirée half rose in her armchair with an expression of nervous agony that distorted all her features.

Lolling in his chair, his arms hanging despondently by his sides, his head on his chest, the actor soliloquized—a fragmentary soliloquy, interrupted by sighs and dramatic hiccoughs, overflowing with imprecations against the pitiless, selfish *bourgeois*, those monsters to whom the artist gives his flesh and blood for food and drink.

Then he reviewed his whole theatrical life, his early triumphs, the golden wreath from the subscribers at Alençon, his marriage to this "sainted woman," and he pointed to the poor creature who stood by his side, with tears streaming from her eyes, and trembling lips, nodding her head dotingly at every word her husband said.

In very truth, a person who never had heard of the illustrious Delobelle could have told his history in detail after that long monologue. He recalled his arrival in Paris, his humiliations, his privations. Alas! he was not the one who had known privation. One had but to look at his full, rotund face beside the thin, drawn faces of the two women. But the actor did not look so closely.

"Oh!" he said, continuing to intoxicate himself with declamatory phrases, "oh! to have struggled so long. For ten years, fifteen years, have I struggled on, supported by these devoted creatures, fed by them."

"Papa, papa, hush," cried Désirée, clasping her hands.

"Yes, fed by them, I say—and I do not blush for it. For I accept all this devotion in the name of sacred art. But this is too much. Too much has been put upon me. I renounce the stage!"

"Oh! my dear, what is that you say?" cried Mamma Delobelle, rushing to his side.

"No, leave me. I have reached the end of my strength. They have slain the artist in me. It is all over. I renounce the stage."

If you had seen the two women throw their arms

about him then, implore him to struggle on, prove to him that he had no right to give up, you could not have restrained your tears. But Delobelle resisted.

He yielded at last, however, and promised to continue the fight a little while, since it was their wish; but it required many an entreaty and caress to carry the point.

CHAPTER IX

AT SAVIGNY

IT was a great misfortune, that sojourn of the two families at Savigny for a month.

After an interval of two years Georges and Sidonie found themselves side by side once more on the old estate, too old not to be always like itself, where the stones, the ponds, the trees, always the same, seemed to cast derision upon all that changes and passes away. A renewal of intercourse under such circumstances must have been disastrous to two natures that were not of a very different stamp, and far more virtuous than those two.

As for Claire, she never had been so happy; Savigny never had seemed so lovely to her. What joy to walk with her child over the greensward where she herself had walked as a child; to sit, a young mother, upon the shaded seats from which her own mother had looked on at her childish games years before; to go, leaning on Georges's arm, to seek out the nooks where they had played together. She felt a tranquil contentment, the overflowing happiness of placid lives which enjoy their

bliss in silence; and all day long her skirts swept along the paths, guided by the tiny footsteps of the child, her cries and her demands upon her mother's care.

Sidonie seldom took part in these maternal promenades. She said that the chatter of children tired her, and therein she agreed with old Gardinois, who seized upon any pretext to annoy his granddaughter. He believed that he accomplished that object by devoting himself exclusively to Sidonie, and arranging even more entertainments for her than on her former visit. The carriages that had been shut up in the carriage-house for two years, and were dusted once a week because the spiders spun their webs on the silk cushions, were placed at her disposal. The horses were harnessed three times a day, and the gate was continually turning on its hinges. Everybody in the house followed this impulse of worldliness. The gardener paid more attention to his flowers because Madame Risler selected the finest ones to wear in her hair at dinner. And then there were calls to be made. Luncheon parties were given, gatherings at which Madame Fromont Jeune presided, but at which Sidonie, with her lively manners, shone supreme. Indeed, Claire often left her a clear field. The child had its hours for sleeping and riding out, with which no amusements could interfere. The mother was compelled to remain away, and it often happened that she was unable to go with Sidonie to meet the partners when they came from Paris at night.

"You will make my excuses," she would say, as the went up to her room.

Madame Risler was triumphant. A picture of elegant indolence, she would drive away behind the galloping horses, unconscious of the swiftness of their pace, without a thought in her mind.

Other carriages were always waiting at the station. Two or three times she heard some one near her whisper, "That is Madame Fromont Jeune," and, indeed, it was a simple matter for people to make the mistake, seeing the three return together from the station, Sidonie sitting beside Georges on the back seat, laughing and talking with him, and Risler facing them, smiling contentedly with his broad hands spread flat upon his knees, but evidently feeling a little out of place in that fine carriage. The thought that she was taken for Madame Fromont made her very proud, and she became a little more accustomed to it every day. On their arrival at the château, the two families separated until dinner; but, in the presence of his wife sitting tranquilly beside the sleeping child, Georges Fromont, too young to be absorbed by the joys of domesticity, was continually thinking of the brilliant Sidonie, whose voice he could hear pouring forth triumphant roulades under the trees in the garden.

While the whole château was thus transformed in obedience to the whims of a young woman, old Gardinois continued to lead the narrow life of a discontented, idle, impotent *parvenu*. The most successful means of distraction he had discovered was espionage. The goings and comings of his servants, the remarks that were made about him in the kitchen, the basket of fruit and vegetables brought every morning from the

kitchen-garden to the pantry, were objects of continual investigation.

For the purposes of this constant spying upon his household, he made use of a stone bench set in the gravel behind an enormous Paulownia. He would sit there whole days at a time, neither reading nor thinking, simply watching to see who went in or out. For the night he had invented something different. In the great vestibule at the main entrance, which opened upon the front steps with their array of bright flowers, he had caused an opening to be made leading to his bedroom on the floor above. An acoustic tube of an improved type was supposed to convey to his ears every sound on the ground floor, even to the conversation of the servants taking the air on the steps.

Unluckily, the instrument was so powerful that it exaggerated all the noises, confused them and prolonged them, and the powerful, regular ticking of a great clock, the cries of a paroquet kept in one of the lower rooms, the clucking of a hen in search of a lost kernel of corn, were all Monsieur Gardinois could hear when he applied his ear to the tube. As for voices, they reached him in the form of a confused buzzing, like the muttering of a crowd, in which it was impossible to distinguish anything. He had nothing to show for the expense of the apparatus, and he concealed his wonderful tube in a fold of his bed-curtains.

One night Gardinois, who had fallen asleep, was awakened suddenly by the creaking of a door. It was an extraordinary thing at that hour. The whole house-

hold was asleep. Nothing could be heard save the footsteps of the watch-dogs on the sand, or their scratching at the foot of a tree in which an owl was screeching. An excellent opportunity to use his listening-tube! Upon putting it to his ear, M. Gardinois was assured that he had made no mistake. The sounds continued. One door was opened, then another. The bolt of the front door was thrown back with an effort. But neither Pyramus nor Thisbe, not even Kiss, the formidable Newfoundland, had made a sign. He rose softly to see who those strange burglars could be, who were leaving the house instead of entering it; and this is what he saw through the slats of his blind:

A tall, slender young man, with Georges's figure and carriage, arm-in-arm with a woman in a lace mantilla. They stopped first at the bench by the Paulownia, which was in full bloom.

It was a superb moonlight night. The moon, silvering the tree-tops, made numberless flakes of light amid the dense foliage. The terraces, white with moonbeams, where the Newfoundlands in their curly coats went to and fro, watching the night butterflies, the smooth, deep waters of the ponds, all shone with a mute, calm brilliance, as if reflected in a silver mirror. Here and there glow-worms twinkled on the edges of the greensward.

The two promenaders remained for a moment beneath the shade of the Paulownia, sitting silent on the bench, lost in the dense darkness which the moon makes where its rays do not reach. Suddenly they appeared in the bright light, wrapped in a languishing

embrace; then walked slowly across the main avenue, and disappeared among the trees.

"I was sure of it!" said old Gardinois, recognizing them. Indeed, what need had he to recognize them? Did not the silence of the dogs, the aspect of the sleeping house, tell him more clearly than anything else could, what species of impudent crime, unknown and unpunished, haunted the avenues in his park by night? Be that as it may, the old peasant was overjoyed by his discovery. He returned to bed without a light, chuckling to himself, and in the little cabinet filled with hunting-implements, whence he had watched them, thinking at first that he had to do with burglars, the moon's rays shone upon naught save the fowling-pieces hanging on the wall and the boxes of cartridges of all sizes.

Sidonie and Georges had taken up the thread of their love at the corner of the same avenue. The year that had passed, marked by hesitation, by vague struggles, by fruitless resistance, seemed to have been only a preparation for their meeting. And it must be said that, when once the fatal step was taken, they were surprised at nothing so much as the fact that they had postponed it so long. Georges Fromont especially was seized by a mad passion. He was false to his wife, his best friend; he was false to Risler, his partner, the faithful companion of his every hour.

He felt a constant renewal, a sort of overflow of remorse, wherein his passion was intensified by the magnitude of his sin. Sidonie became his one engrossing thought, and he discovered that until then he had not lived. As for her, her love was made up of vanity and

spite. The thing that she relished above all else was Claire's degradation in her eyes. Ah! if she could only have said to her, "Your husband loves me—he is false to you with me," her pleasure would have been even greater. As for Risler, in her view he richly deserved what had happened to him. In her old apprentice's jargon, in which she still thought, even if she did not speak it, the poor man was only "an old fool," whom she had taken as a stepping-stone to fortune. "An old fool" is made to be deceived!

During the day Savigny belonged to Claire, to the child who ran about upon the gravel, laughing at the birds and the clouds, and who grew apace. The mother and child had for their own the daylight, the paths filled with sunbeams. But the blue nights were given over to sin, to that sin firmly installed in the château, which spoke in undertones, crept noiselessly behind the closed blinds, and in face of which the sleeping house became dumb and blind, and resumed its stony impassibility, as if it were ashamed to see and hear.

CHAPTER X

SIGISMOND PLANUS TREMBLES FOR HIS CASH-BOX

CARRIAGE, my dear Chorche?—I —have a carriage? What for?"

"I assure you, my dear Risler, that it is quite essential for you. Our business, our relations, are extending every day; the coupé is no longer enough for us. Besides, it doesn't look well to see one of the partners always in his carriage and the other on foot. Believe me, it is a necessary outlay, and of course it will go into the general expenses of the firm. Come, resign yourself to the inevitable."

It was genuine resignation. It seemed to Risler as if he were stealing something in taking the money for such an unheard-of luxury as a carriage; however, he ended by yielding to Georges's persistent representations, thinking as he did so:

"This will make Sidonie very happy!"

The poor fellow had no suspicion that Sidonie herself, a month before, had selected at Binder's the coupé which Georges insisted upon giving her, and which was to be charged to expense account in order not to alarm the husband.

Honest Risler was so plainly created to be deceived. His inborn uprightness, the implicit confidence in men and things, which was the foundation of his transparent nature, had been intensified of late by preoccupation resulting from his pursuit of the Risler Press, an invention destined to revolutionize the wall-paper industry and representing in his eyes his contribution to the partnership assets. When he laid aside his drawings and left his little work-room on the first floor, his face invariably wore the absorbed look of the man who has his life on one side, his anxieties on another. What a delight it was to him, therefore, to find his home always tranquil, his wife always in good humor, becomingly dressed and smiling.

Without undertaking to explain the change to himself, he recognized that for some time past the "little one" had not been as before in her treatment of him. She allowed him to resume his old habits: the pipe at dessert, the little nap after dinner, the appointments at the brewery with Chèbe and Delobelle. Their apartments also were transformed, embellished.

A grand piano by a famous maker made its appearance in the salon in place of the old one, and Madame Dobson, the singing-teacher, came no longer twice a week, but every day, music-roll in hand.

Of a curious type was that young woman of American extraction, with hair of an acid blond, like lemon-pulp, over a bold forehead and metallic blue eyes. As her husband would not allow her to go on the stage, she gave lessons, and sang in some *bourgeois* salons. As a result of living in the artificial world of compositions

for voice and piano, she had contracted a species of sentimental frenzy.

She was romance itself. In her mouth the words "love" and "passion" seemed to have eighty syllables, she uttered them with so much expression. Oh, expression! That was what Mistress Dobson placed before everything, and what she tried, and tried in vain, to impart to her pupil.

Ay Chiquita, upon which Paris fed for several seasons, was then at the height of its popularity. Sidonie studied it conscientiously, and all the morning she could be heard singing:

"On dit que tu te maries,
Tu sais que j'en puis mourir." '*

"Mouri-i-i-i-i-r!" the expressive Madame Dobson would interpose, while her hands wandered feebly over the piano-keys; and die she would, raising her light blue eyes to the ceiling and wildly throwing back her head. Sidonie never could accomplish it. Her mischievous eyes, her lips, crimson with fulness of life, were not made for such Æolian-harp sentimentalities. The refrains of Offenbach or Hervé, interspersed with unexpected notes, in which one resorts to expressive gestures for aid, to a motion of the head or the body, would have suited her better; but she dared not admit it to her sentimental instructress. By the way, although she had been made to sing a great deal at Mademoiselle Le Mire's, her voice was still fresh and not unpleasing.

*They say that thou'rt to marry
Thou know'st that I may die.

Having no social connections, she came gradually to make a friend of her singing-mistress. She would keep her to breakfast, take her to drive in the new coupé and to assist in her purchases of gowns and jewels. Madame Dobson's sentimental and sympathetic tone led one to repose confidence in her. Her continual repinings seemed too long to attract other repinings. Sidonie told her of Georges, of their relations, attempting to palliate her offence by blaming the cruelty of her parents in marrying her by force to a man much older than herself. Madame Dobson at once showed a disposition to assist them; not that the little woman was venal, but she had a passion for passion, a taste for romantic intrigue. As she was unhappy in her own home, married to a dentist who beat her, all husbands were monsters in her eyes, and poor Risler especially seemed to her a horrible tyrant whom his wife was quite justified in hating and deceiving.

She was an active confidant and a very useful one. Two or three times a week she would bring tickets for a box at the Opéra or the Italiens, or some one of the little theatres which enjoy a temporary vogue, and cause all Paris to go from one end of Paris to the other for a season. In Risler's eyes the tickets came from Madame Dobson; she had as many as she chose to the theatres where operas were given. The poor wretch had no suspicion that one of those boxes for an important "first night" had often cost his partner ten or fifteen louis.

In the evening, when his wife went away, always splendidly attired, he would gaze admiringly at her,

having no suspicion of the cost of her costumes, certainly none of the man who paid for them, and would await her return at his table by the fire, busy with his drawings, free from care, and happy to be able to say to himself, "What a good time she is having!"

On the floor below, at the Fromonts', the same comedy was being played, but with a transposition of parts. There it was the young wife who sat by the fire. Every evening, half an hour after Sidonie's departure, the great gate swung open to give passage to the Fromont coupé conveying Monsieur to his club. What would you have? Business has its demands. All the great deals are arranged at the club, around the *bouillotte* table, and a man must go there or suffer the penalty of seeing his business fall off. Claire innocently believed it all. When her husband had gone, she felt sad for a moment. She would have liked so much to keep him with her or to go out leaning on his arm, to seek enjoyment with him. But the sight of the child, cooing in front of the fire and kicking her little pink feet while she was being undressed, speedily soothed the mother. Then the eloquent word "business," the merchant's reason of state, was always at hand to help her to resign herself.

Georges and Sidonie met at the theatre. Their feeling at first when they were together was one of satisfied vanity. People stared at them a great deal. She was really pretty now, and her irregular but attractive features, which required the aid of all the eccentricities of the prevailing style in order to produce their full effect, adapted themselves to them so perfectly that you would

have said they were invented expressly for her. In a few moments they went away, and Madame Dobson was left alone in the box. They had hired a small suite on the Avenue Gabriel, near the *rond-point* of the Champs Elysées—the dream of the young women at the Le Mire establishment—two luxuriously furnished, quiet rooms, where the silence of the wealthy quarter, disturbed only by passing carriages, formed a blissful surrounding for their love.

Little by little, when she had become accustomed to her sin, she conceived the most audacious whims. From her old working-days she had retained in the depths of her memory the names of public balls, of famous restaurants, where she was eager to go now, just as she took pleasure in causing the doors to be thrown open for her at the establishments of the great dressmakers, whose signs only she had known in her earlier days. For what she sought above all else in this *liaison* was revenge for the sorrows and humiliations of her youth. Nothing delighted her so much, for example, when returning from an evening drive in the Bois, as a supper at the Café Anglais with the sounds of luxurious vice around her. From these repeated excursions she brought back peculiarities of speech and behavior, equivocal songs, and a style of dress that imported into the *bourgeois* atmosphere of the old commercial house an accurate reproduction of the most advanced type of the Paris cocotte of that period.

At the factory they began to suspect something. The women of the people, even the poorest, are so

quick at picking a costume to pieces! When Madame Risler went out, about three o'clock, fifty pairs of sharp, envious eyes, lying in ambush at the windows of the polishing-shop, watched her pass, penetrating to the lowest depths of her guilty conscience through her black velvet dolman and her cuirass of sparkling jet.

Although she did not suspect it, all the secrets of that mad brain were flying about her like the ribbons that played upon her bare neck; and her daintily-shod feet, in their bronzed boots with ten buttons, told the story of all sorts of clandestine expeditions, of the carpeted stairways they ascended at night on their way to supper, and the warm fur robes in which they were wrapped when the coupé made the circuit of the lake in the darkness dotted with lanterns.

The workwomen laughed sneeringly and whispered: "Just look at that Tata Bébelle! A fine way to dress to go out. She don't rig herself up like that to go to mass, that's sure! To think that it ain't three years since she used to start for the shop every morning in an old waterproof, and two sous' worth of roasted chestnuts in her pockets to keep her fingers warm. Now she rides in her carriage."

And amid the talc dust and the roaring of the stoves, red-hot in winter and summer alike, more than one poor girl reflected on the caprice of chance in absolutely transforming a woman's existence, and began to dream vaguely of a magnificent future which might perhaps be in store for herself without her suspecting it.

In everybody's opinion Risler was a dishonored husband. Two assistants in the printing-room—faithful

patrons of the Folies Dramatiques—declared that they had seen Madame Risler several times at their theatre, accompanied by some escort who kept out of sight at the rear of the box. Père Achille, too, told of amazing things. That Sidonie had a lover, that she had several lovers, in fact, no one entertained a doubt. But no one had as yet thought of Fromont Jeune.

And yet she showed no prudence whatever in her relations with him. On the contrary, she seemed to make a parade of them; it may be that that was what saved them. How many times she accosted him boldly on the steps to agree upon a rendezvous for the evening! How many times she had amused herself in making him shudder by looking into his eyes before every one! When the first confusion had passed, Georges was grateful to her for these exhibitions of audacity, which he attributed to the intensity of her passion. He was mistaken.

What she would have liked, although she did not admit it to herself, would have been to have Claire see them, to have her draw aside the curtain at her window, to have her conceive a suspicion of what was passing. She needed that in order to be perfectly happy: that her rival should be unhappy. But her wish was ungratified; Claire Fromont noticed nothing and lived, as did Risler, in imperturbable serenity.

Only Sigismond, the old cashier, was really ill at ease. And yet he was not thinking of Sidonie when, with his pen behind his ear, he paused a moment in his work and gazed fixedly through his grating at the drenched soil of the little garden. He was thinking

solely of his master, of Monsieur "Chorche," who was drawing a great deal of money now for his current expenses and sowing confusion in all his books. Every time it was some new excuse. He would come to the little wicket with an unconcerned air:

"Have you a little money, my good Planus? I was worsted again at *bouillotte* last night, and I don't want to send to the bank for such a trifle."

Sigismond Planus would open his cash-box, with an air of regret, to get the sum requested, and he would remember with terror a certain day when Monsieur Georges, then only twenty years old, had confessed to his uncle that he owed several thousand francs in gambling debts. The elder man thereupon conceived a violent antipathy for the club and contempt for all its members. A rich tradesman who was a member happened to come to the factory one day, and Sigismond said to him with brutal frankness:

"The devil take your Cercle du Château d'Eau! Monsieur Georges has left more than thirty thousand francs there in two months."

The other began to laugh.

"Why, you're greatly mistaken, Père Planus—it's at least three months since we have seen your master."

The cashier did not pursue the conversation; but a terrible thought took up its abode in his mind, and he turned it over and over all day long.

If Georges did not go to the club, where did he pass his evenings? Where did he spend so much money?

There was evidently a woman at the bottom of the affair.

As soon as that idea occurred to him, Sigismond Planus began to tremble seriously for his cash-box. That old bear from the canton of Berne, a confirmed bachelor, had a terrible dread of women in general and Parisian women in particular. He deemed it his duty, first of all, in order to set his conscience at rest, to warn Risler. He did it at first in rather a vague way.

"Monsieur Georges is spending a great deal of money," he said to him one day.

Risler exhibited no surprise.

"What do you expect me to do, my old Sigismond? It is his right."

And the honest fellow meant what he said. In his eyes Fromont Jeune was the absolute master of the establishment. It would have been a fine thing, and no mistake, for him, an ex-draughtsman, to venture to make any comments. The cashier dared say no more until the day when a messenger came from a great shawl-house with a bill for six thousand francs for a cashmere shawl.

He went to Georges in his office.

"Shall I pay it, Monsieur?"

Georges Fromont was a little annoyed. Sidonie had forgotten to tell him of this latest purchase; she used no ceremony with him now.

"Pay it, pay it, Père Planus," he said, with a shade of embarrassment, and added: "Charge it to the account of Fromont Jeune. It is a commission intrusted to me by a friend."

That evening, as Sigismond was lighting his little

lamp, he saw Risler crossing the garden, and tapped on the window to call him.

"It's a woman," he said, under his breath. "I have the proof of it now."

As he uttered the awful words "a woman" his voice shook with alarm and was drowned in the great uproar of the factory. The sounds of the work in progress had a sinister meaning to the unhappy cashier at that moment. It seemed to him as if all the whirring machinery, the great chimney pouring forth its clouds of smoke, the noise of the workmen at their different tasks—as if all this tumult and bustle and fatigue were for the benefit of a mysterious little being, dressed in velvet and adorned with jewels.

Risler laughed at him and refused to believe him. He had long been acquainted with his compatriot's mania for detecting in everything the pernicious influence of woman. And yet Planus's words sometimes recurred to his thoughts, especially in the evening when Sidonie, after all the commotion attendant upon the completion of her toilette, went away to the theatre with Madame Dobson, leaving the apartment empty as soon as her long train had swept across the threshold. Candles burning in front of the mirrors, divers little toilette articles scattered about and thrown aside, told of extravagant caprices and a reckless expenditure of money. Risler thought nothing of all that; but, when he heard Georges's carriage rolling through the court-yard, he had a feeling of discomfort at the thought of Madame Fromont passing her evenings entirely alone. Poor woman! Suppose what Planus said were true!

Suppose Georges really had a second establishment! Oh, it would be frightful!

Thereupon, instead of beginning to work, he would go softly downstairs and ask if Madame were visible, deeming it his duty to keep her company.

The little girl was always in bed, but the little cap, the blue shoes, were still lying in front of the fire. Claire was either reading or working, with her silent mother beside her, always rubbing or dusting with feverish energy, exhausting herself by blowing on the case of her watch, and nervously taking the same thing up and putting it down again ten times in succession, with the obstinate persistence of mania. Nor was honest Risler a very entertaining companion; but that did not prevent the young woman from welcoming him kindly. She knew all that was said about Sidonie in the factory; and although she did not believe half of it, the sight of the poor man, whom his wife left alone so often, moved her heart to pity. Mutual compassion formed the basis of that placid friendship, and nothing could be more touching than these two deserted ones; one pitying the other and each trying to divert the other's thoughts.

Seated at the small, brightly lighted table in the centre of the salon, Risler would gradually yield to the influence of the warmth of the fire and the harmony of his surroundings. He found there articles of furniture with which he had been familiar for twenty years, the portrait of his former employer; and his dear Madame Chorche, bending over some little piece of needlework at his side, seemed to him even younger and more

lovable among all those old souvenirs. From time to time she would rise to go and look at the child sleeping in the adjoining room, whose soft breathing they could hear in the intervals of silence. Without fully realizing it, Risler felt more comfortable and warmer there than in his own apartment; for on certain days those attractive rooms, where the doors were forever being thrown open for hurried exits or returns, gave him the impression of a hall without doors or windows, open to the four winds. His rooms were a camping-ground; this was a home. A care-taking hand caused order and refinement to reign everywhere. The chairs seemed to be talking together in undertones, the fire burned with a delightful sound, and Mademoiselle Fromont's little cap retained in every bow of its blue ribbons suggestions of sweet smiles and baby glances. .

And while Claire was thinking that such an excellent man deserved a better companion in life, Risler, watching the calm and lovely face turned toward him, the intelligent, kindly eyes, asked himself who the hussy could be for whom Georges Fromont neglected such an adorable woman.

CHAPTER XI

THE INVENTORY

THE house in which old Planus lived at Montrouge adjoined the one which the Chèbes had occupied for some time. There was the same ground floor with three windows, and a single floor above, the same garden with its lattice-work fence, the same borders of green box. There the old cashier lived with his sister. He took the first omnibus that left the office in the morning, returned at dinner-time, and on Sundays remained at home, tending his flowers and his poultry. The old maid was his housekeeper and did all the cooking and sewing. A happier couple never lived.

Celibates both, they were bound together by an equal hatred of marriage. The sister abhorred all men, the brother looked upon all women with suspicion; but they adored each other, each considering the other an exception to the general perversity of the sex.

In speaking of him she always said: "Monsieur Planus, my brother!"—and he, with the same affectionate solemnity, interspersed all his sentences with "Mademoiselle Planus, my sister!" To those two re-

tiring and innocent creatures, Paris, of which they knew nothing, although they visited it every day, was a den of monsters of two varieties, bent upon doing one another the utmost possible injury; and whenever, amid the gossip of the quarter, a conjugal drama came to their ears, each of them, beset by his or her own idea, blamed a different culprit.

"It is the husband's fault," would be the verdict of "Mademoiselle Planus, my sister."

"It is the wife's fault," "Monsieur Planus, my brother," would reply.

"Oh! the men——"

"Oh! the women——"

That was their one never-failing subject of discussion in those rare hours of idleness which old Sigismond set aside in his busy day, which was as carefully ruled off as his account-books. For some time past the discussions between the brother and sister had been marked by extraordinary animation. They were deeply interested in what was taking place at the factory. The sister was full of pity for Madame Fromont and considered her husband's conduct altogether outrageous; as for Sigismond, he could find no words bitter enough for the unknown trollop who sent bills for six-thousand-franc shawls to be paid from his cash-box. In his eyes, the honor and fair fame of the old house he had served since his youth were at stake.

"What will become of us?" he repeated again and again. "Oh! these women——"

One day Mademoiselle Planus sat by the fire with her knitting, waiting for her brother.

The table had been laid for half an hour, and the old lady was beginning to be worried by such unheard-of tardiness, when Sigismond entered with a most distressed face, and without a word, which was contrary to all his habits.

He waited until the door was shut tight, then said in a low voice, in response to his sister's disturbed and questioning expression:

"I have some news. I know who the woman is who is doing her best to ruin us."

Lowering his voice still more, after glancing about at the silent walls of their little dining-room, he uttered a name so unexpected that Mademoiselle Planus made him repeat it.

"Is it possible?"

"It is the truth."

And, despite his grief, he had almost a triumphant air.

His old sister could not believe it. Such a refined, polite person, who had received her with so much cordiality!—How could any one imagine such a thing?

"I have proofs," said Sigismond Planus.

Thereupon he told her how Père Achille had met Sidonie and Georges one night at eleven o'clock, just as they entered a small furnished lodging-house in the Montmartre quarter; and he was a man who never lied. They had known him for a long while. Besides, others had met them. Nothing else was talked about at the factory. Risler alone suspected nothing.

"But it is your duty to tell him," declared Mademoiselle Planus.

The cashier's face assumed a grave expression.

"It is a very delicate matter. In the first place, who knows whether he would believe me? There are blind men so blind that— And then, by interfering between the two partners, I risk the loss of my place. Oh! the women—the women! When I think how happy Risler might have been. When I sent for him to come to Paris with his brother, he hadn't a sou; and to-day he is at the head of one of the first houses in Paris. Do you suppose that he would be content with that? Oh! no, of course not! Monsieur must marry. As if any one needed to marry! And, worse yet, he marries a Parisian woman, one of those frowsy-haired chits that are the ruin of an honest house, when he had at his hand a fine girl, of almost his own age, a countrywoman, used to work, and well put together, as you might say!"

"Mademoiselle Planus, my sister," to whose physical structure he alluded, had a magnificent opportunity to exclaim, "Oh! the men, the men!" but she was silent. It was a very delicate question, and perhaps, if Risler had chosen in time, he might have been the only one.

Old Sigismond continued:

"And this is what we have come to. For three months the leading wall-paper factory in Paris has been tied to the petticoats of that good-for-nothing. You should see how the money flies. All day long I do nothing but open my wicket to meet Monsieur Georges's calls. He always applies to me, because at his banker's too much notice would be taken of it, whereas in our office money comes and goes, comes in

and goes out. But look out for the inventory! We shall have some pretty figures to show at the end of the year. The worst part of the whole business is that Risler won't listen to anything. I have warned him several times: 'Look out, Monsieur Georges is making a fool of himself for some woman.' He either turns away with a shrug, or else he tells me that it is none of his business and that Fromont Jeune is the master. Upon my word, one would almost think—one would almost think——"

The cashier did not finish his sentence; but his silence was pregnant with unspoken thoughts.

The old maid was appalled; but, like most women under such circumstances, instead of seeking a remedy for the evil, she wandered off into a maze of regrets, conjectures, and retrospective lamentations. What a misfortune that they had not known it sooner when they had the Chèbes for neighbors. Madame Chèbe was such an honorable woman. They might have put the matter before her so that she would keep an eye on Sidonie and talk seriously to her.

"Indeed, that's a good idea," Sigismond interrupted. "You must go to the Rue du Mail and tell her parents. I thought at first of writing to little Frantz. He always had a great deal of influence over his brother, and he's the only person on earth who could say certain things to him. But Frantz is so far away. And then it would be such a terrible thing to do. I can't help pitying that unlucky Risler, though. No! the best way is to tell Madame Chèbe. Will you undertake to do it, sister?"

It was a dangerous commission. Mademoiselle Planus made some objections, but she never had been able to resist her brother's wishes, and the desire to be of service to their old friend Risler assisted materially in persuading her.

Thanks to his son-in-law's kindness, M. Chèbe had succeeded in gratifying his latest whim. For three months past he had been living at his famous warehouse on the Rue du Mail, and a great sensation was created in the quarter by that shop without merchandise, the shutters of which were taken down in the morning and put up again at night, as in wholesale houses. Shelves had been placed all around the walls, there was a new counter, a safe, a huge pair of scales. In a word, M. Chèbe possessed all the requisites of a business of some sort, but did not know as yet just what business he would choose.

He pondered the subject all day as he walked to and fro across the shop, encumbered with several large pieces of bedroom furniture which they had been unable to get into the back room; he pondered it, too, as he stood on his doorstep, with his pen behind his ear, and feasted his eyes delightedly on the hurly-burly of Parisian commerce. The clerks who passed with their packages of samples under their arms, the vans of the express companies, the omnibuses, the porters, the wheelbarrows, the great bales of merchandise at the neighboring doors, the packages of rich stuffs and trimmings which were dragged in the mud before being consigned to those underground regions, those dark

holes stuffed with treasures, where the fortune of business lies in embryo—all these things delighted M. Chèbe.

He amused himself guessing at the contents of the bales and was first at the fray when some passer-by received a heavy package upon his feet, or the horses attached to a dray, spirited and restive, made the long vehicle standing across the street an obstacle to circulation. He had, moreover, the thousand-and-one distractions of the petty tradesman without customers, the heavy showers, the accidents, the thefts, the disputes.

At the end of the day M. Chèbe, dazed, bewildered, worn out by the labor of other people, would stretch himself out in his easy-chair and say to his wife, as he wiped his forehead:

"That's the kind of life I need—an active life."

Madame Chèbe would smile softly without replying. Accustomed as she was to all her husband's whims, she had made herself as comfortable as possible in a back room with an outlook upon a dark yard, consoling herself with reflections on the former prosperity of her parents and her daughter's wealth; and, being always neatly dressed, she had succeeded already in acquiring the respect of neighbors and tradesmen.

She asked nothing more than not to be confounded with the wives of workingmen, often less poor than herself, and to be allowed to retain, in spite of everything, a petty *bourgeois* superiority. That was her constant thought; and so the back room in which she lived, and where it was dark at three in the afternoon,

was resplendent with order and cleanliness. During the day the bed became a couch, an old shawl did duty as a tablecloth, the fireplace, hidden by a screen, served as a pantry, and the meals were cooked in modest retirement on a stove no larger than a foot-warmer. A tranquil life—that was the dream of the poor woman, who was continually tormented by the whims of an uncongenial companion.

In the early days of his tenancy, M. Chèbe had caused these words to be inscribed in letters a foot long on the fresh paint of his shop-front:

COMMISSION—EXPORTATION

No specifications. His neighbors sold tulle, broadcloth, linen; he was inclined to sell everything, but could not make up his mind just what. With what arguments did his indecision lead him to favor Madame Chèbe as they sat together in the evening!

"I don't know anything about linen; but when you come to broadcloth, I understand that. Only, if I go into broadcloths I must have a man to travel; for the best kinds come from Sedan and Elbeuf. I say nothing about calicoes; summer is the time for them. As for tulle, that's out of the question; the season is too far advanced."

He usually brought his discourse to a close with the words:

"The night will bring counsel—let us go to bed."

And to bed he would go, to his wife's great relief.

After three or four months of this life, M. Chèbe began to tire of it. The pains in the head, the dizzy fits gradually returned. The quarter was noisy and unhealthy: besides, business was at a standstill. Nothing was to be done in any line, broadcloths, tissues, or anything else.

It was just at the period of this new crisis that "Mademoiselle Planus, my sister," called to speak about Sidonie.

The old maid had said to herself on the way, "I must break it gently." But, like all shy people, she relieved herself of her burden in the first words she spoke after entering the house.

It was a stunning blow. When she heard the accusation made against her daughter, Madame Chèbe rose in indignation. No one could ever make her believe such a thing. Her poor Sidonie was the victim of an infamous slander.

M. Chèbe, for his part, adopted a very lofty tone, with significant phrases and motions of the head, taking everything to himself as was his custom. How could any one suppose that *his* child, a Chèbe, the daughter of an honorable business man known for thirty years on the street, was capable of—— Nonsense!

Mademoiselle Planus insisted. It was a painful thing to her to be considered a gossip, a hawker of unsavory stories. But they had incontestable proofs. It was no longer a secret to anybody.

"And even suppose it were true," cried M. Chèbe, furious at her persistence. "Is it for us to worry about

it? Our daughter is married. She lives a long way from her parents. It is for her husband, who is much older than she, to advise and guide her. Does he so much as think of doing it?"

Upon that the little man began to inveigh against his son-in-law, that cold-blooded Swiss, who passed his life in his office devising machines, refused to accompany his wife into society, and preferred his old-bachelor habits, his pipe and his brewery, to everything else.

You should have seen the air of aristocratic disdain with which M. Chèbe pronounced the word "brewery!" And yet almost every evening he went there to meet Risler, and overwhelmed him with reproaches if he once failed to appear at the rendezvous.

Behind all this verbiage the merchant of the Rue du Mail—"Commission—Exportation"—had a very definite idea. He wished to give up his shop, to retire from business, and for some time he had been thinking of going to see Sidonie, in order to interest her in his new schemes. That was not the time, therefore, to make disagreeable scenes, to prate about paternal authority and conjugal honor. As for Madame Chèbe, being somewhat less confident than before of her daughter's virtue, she took refuge in the most profound silence. The poor woman wished that she were deaf and blind —that she never had known Mademoiselle Planus.

Like all persons who have been very unhappy, she loved a benumbed existence with a semblance of tranquillity, and ignorance seemed to her preferable to everything. As if life were not sad enough, good

heavens! And then, after all, Sidonie had always been a good girl; why should she not be a good woman?"

Night was falling. M. Chèbe rose gravely to close the shutters of the shop and light a gas-jet which illumined the bare walls, the empty, polished shelves, and the whole extraordinary place, which reminded one strongly of the day following a failure. With his lips closed disdainfully, in his determination to remain silent, he seemed to say to the old lady, "Night has come—it is time for you to go home." And all the while they could hear Madame Chèbe sobbing in the back room, as she went to and fro preparing supper.

Mademoiselle Planus got no further satisfaction from her visit.

"Well?" queried old Sigismond, who was impatiently awaiting her return.

"They wouldn't believe me, and politely showed me the door."

She had tears in her eyes at the thought of her humiliation.

The old man's face flushed, and he said in a grave voice, taking his sister's hand:

"Mademoiselle Planus, my sister, I ask your pardon for having made you take this step; but the honor of the house of Fromont was at stake."

From that moment Sigismond became more and more depressed. His cash-box no longer seemed to him safe or secure. Even when Fromont Jeune did not ask him for money, he was afraid, and he summed up all his apprehensions in four words which came continually to his lips when talking with his sister:

"*I haf no gonfidence*," he would say, in his hoarse Swiss *patois*.

Thinking always of his cash-box, he dreamed sometimes that it had broken apart at all the joints, and insisted on remaining open, no matter how much he turned the key; or else that a high wind had scattered all the papers, notes, cheques, and bills, and that he ran after them all over the factory, tiring himself out in the attempt to pick them up.

In the daytime, as he sat behind his grating in the silence of his office, he imagined that a little white mouse had eaten its way through the bottom of the box and was gnawing and destroying all its contents, growing plumper and prettier as the work of destruction went on.

So that, when Sidonie appeared on the steps about the middle of the afternoon, in her pretty Parisian plumage, old Sigismond shuddered with rage. In his eyes it was the ruin of the house that stood there, ruin in a magnificent costume, with its little coupé at the door, and the placid bearing of a happy coquette.

Madame Risler had no suspicion that, at that window on the ground floor, sat an untiring foe who watched her slightest movements, the most trivial details of her life, the going and coming of her music-teacher, the arrival of the fashionable dressmaker in the morning, all the boxes that were brought to the house, and the laced cap of the employé of the *Magasin du Louvre*, whose heavy wagon stopped at the gate with a jingling of bells, like a diligence drawn by stout horses which were dragging the house of Fromont to bankruptcy at break-neck speed.

Sigismond counted the packages, weighed them with his eye as they passed, and gazed inquisitively into Risler's apartments through the open windows. The carpets that were shaken with a great noise, the jardinières that were brought into the sunlight filled with fragile, unseasonable flowers, rare and expensive, the gorgeous hangings—none of these things escaped his notice.

The new acquisitions of the household stared him in the face, reminding him of some request for a large amount.

But the one thing that he studied more carefully than all else was Risler's countenance.

In his view that woman was in a fair way to change his friend, the best, the most upright of men, into a shameless villain. There was no possibility of doubt that Risler knew of his dishonor, and submitted to it. He was paid to keep quiet.

Certainly there was something monstrous in such a supposition. But it is the tendency of innocent natures, when they are made acquainted with evil for the first time, to go at once too far, beyond reason. When he was once convinced of the treachery of Georges and Sidonie, Risler's degradation seemed to the cashier less impossible of comprehension. On what other theory could his indifference, in the face of his partner's heavy expenditures, be explained?

The excellent Sigismond, in his narrow, stereotyped honesty, could not understand the delicacy of Risler's heart. At the same time, the methodical bookkeeper's habit of thought and his clear-sightedness in business

were a thousand leagues from that absent-minded, flighty character, half-artist, half-inventor. He judged him by himself, having no conception of the condition of a man with the disease of invention, absorbed by a fixed idea. Such men are somnambulists. They look, but do not see, their eyes being turned within.

It was Sigismond's belief that Risler did see. That belief made the old cashier very unhappy. He began by staring at his friend whenever he entered the counting-room; then, discouraged by his immovable indifference, which he believed to be wilful and premeditated, covering his face like a mask, he adopted the plan of turning away and fumbling among his papers to avoid those false glances, and keeping his eyes fixed on the garden paths or the interlaced wires of the grating when he spoke to him. Even his words were confused and distorted, like his glances. No one could say positively to whom he was talking.

No more friendly smiles, no more reminiscences as they turned over the leaves of the cash-book together.

"This was the year you came to the factory. Your first increase of pay. Do you remember? We dined at Douix's that day. And then the Café des Aveugles in the evening, eh? What a debauch!"

At last Risler noticed the strange coolness that had sprung up between Sigismond and himself. He mentioned it to his wife.

For some time past she had felt that antipathy prowling about her. Sometimes, as she crossed the courtyard, she was oppressed, as it were, by malevolent glances which caused her to turn nervously toward the

old cashier's corner. This estrangement between the friends alarmed her, and she very quickly determined to put her husband on his guard against Planus's unpleasant remarks.

"Don't you see that he is jealous of you, of your position? A man who was once his equal, now his superior, he can't stand that. But why bother one's head about all these spiteful creatures? Why, I am surrounded by them here."

Risler looked at her with wide-open eyes:—"You?"

"Why, yes, it is easy enough to see that all these people detest me. They bear little Chèbe a grudge because she has become Madame Risler Aîné. Heaven only knows all the outrageous things that are said about me! And your cashier doesn't keep his tongue in his pocket, I assure you. What a spiteful fellow he is!"

These few words had their effect. Risler, indignant, but too proud to complain, met coldness with coldness. Those two honest men, each intensely distrustful of the other, could no longer meet without a painful sensation, so that, after a while, Risler ceased to go to the counting-room at all. It was not difficult for him, as Fromont Jeune had charge of all financial matters. His month's allowance was carried to him on the thirtieth of each month. This arrangement afforded Sidonie and Georges additional facilities, and opportunity for all sorts of underhand dealing.

She thereupon turned her attention to the completion of her programme of a life of luxury. She lacked a country house. In her heart she detested the trees,

the fields, the country roads that cover you with dust. "The most dismal things on earth," she used to say. But Claire Fromont passed the summer at Savigny. As soon as the first fine days arrived, the trunks were packed and the curtains taken down on the floor below; and a great furniture van, with the little girl's blue bassinet rocking on top, set off for the grandfather's château. Then, one morning, the mother, grandmother, child, and nurse, a medley of white gowns and light veils, would drive away behind two fast horses toward the sunny lawns and the pleasant shade of the avenues.

At that season Paris was ugly, depopulated; and although Sidonie loved it even in the summer, which heats it like a furnace, it troubled her to think that all the fashion and wealth of Paris were driving by the seashore under their light umbrellas, and would make their outing an excuse for a thousand new inventious, for original styles of the most *risqué* sort, which would permit one to show that one has a pretty ankle and long, curly chestnut hair of one's own.

The seashore bathing resorts! She could not think of them; Risler could not leave Paris.

How about buying a country house? They had not the means. To be sure, there was the lover, who would have asked nothing better than to gratify this latest whim; but a country house cannot be concealed like a bracelet or a shawl. The husband must be induced to accept it. That was not an easy matter; however, they might venture to try it with Risler.

To pave the way, she talked to him incessantly about

a little nook in the country, not too expensive, very near Paris. Risler listened with a smile. He thought of the high grass, of the orchard filled with fine fruit-trees, being already tormented by the longing to possess which comes with wealth; but, as he was prudent, he said:

"We will see, we will see. Let us wait till the end of the year."

The end of the year, that is to say, the striking of the balance-sheet.

The balance-sheet! That is the magic word. All through the year we go on and on in the eddying whirl of business. Money comes and goes, circulates, attracts other money, vanishes; and the fortune of the firm, like a slippery, gleaming snake, always in motion, expands, contracts, diminishes, or increases, and it is impossible to know our condition until there comes a moment of rest. Not until the inventory shall we know the truth, and whether the year, which seems to have been prosperous, has really been so.

The account of stock is usually taken late in December, between Christmas and New Year's Day. As it requires much extra labor to prepare it, everybody works far into the night. The whole establishment is alert. The lamps remain lighted in the offices long after the doors are closed, and seem to share in the festal atmosphere peculiar to that last week of the year, when so many windows are illuminated for family gatherings. Every one, even to the least important employé of the firm, is interested in the results of the inventory. The increases of salary, the New Year's presents, depend upon those blessed figures. And so,

while the vast interests of a wealthy house are trembling in the balance, the wives and children and aged parents of the clerks, in their fifth-floor tenements or poor apartments in the suburbs, talk of nothing but the inventory, the results of which will make themselves felt either by a greatly increased need of economy or by some purchase, long postponed, which the New Year's gift will make possible at last.

On the premises of Fromont Jeune and Risler Aîné, Sigismond Planus is the god of the establishment at that season, and his little office a sanctuary where all the clerks perform their devotions. In the silence of the sleeping factory, the heavy pages of the great books rustle as they are turned, and names called aloud cause search to be made in other books. Pens scratch. The old cashier, surrounded by his lieutenants, has a business-like, awe-inspiring air. From time to time Fromont Jeune, on the point of going out in his carriage, looks in for a moment, with a cigar in his mouth, neatly gloved and ready for the street. He walks slowly, on tiptoe, puts his face to the grating:

"Well!—are you getting on all right?"

Sigismond gives a grunt, and the young master takes his leave, afraid to ask any further questions. He knows from the cashier's expression that the showing will be a bad one.

In truth, since the days of the Revolution, when there was fighting in the very courtyard of the factory, so pitiable an inventory never had been seen in the Fromont establishment. Receipts and expenditures balanced each other. The general expense account

had eaten up everything, and, furthermore, Fromont Jeune was indebted to the firm in a large sum. You should have seen old Planus's air of consternation when, on the 31st of December, he went up to Georges's office to make report of his labors.

Georges took a very cheerful view of the matter. Everything would go better next year. And to restore the cashier's good humor he gave him an extraordinary bonus of a thousand francs, instead of the five hundred his uncle used always to give. Everybody felt the effects of that generous impulse, and, in the universal satisfaction, the deplorable results of the yearly accounting were very soon forgotten. As for Risler, Georges chose to take it upon himself to inform him as to the situation.

When he entered his partner's little closet, which was lighted from above by a window in the ceiling, so that the light fell directly upon the subject of the inventor's meditations, Fromont hesitated a moment, filled with shame and remorse for what he was about to do.

The other, when he heard the door, turned joyfully toward his partner.

"Chorche, Chorche, my dear fellow—I have got it, our press. There are still a few little things to think out. But no matter! I am sure now of my invention: you will see—you will see! Ah! the Prochassons can experiment all they choose. With the Risler Press we will crush all rivalry."

"Bravo, my comrade!" replied Fromont Jeune. "So much for the future; but you don't seem to think about the present. What about this inventory?"

"Ah, yes! to be sure. I had forgotten all about it. It isn't very satisfactory, is it?"

He said that because of the somewhat disturbed and embarrassed expression on Georges's face.

"Why, yes, on the contrary, it is very satisfactory indeed," was the reply. "We have every reason to be satisfied, especially as this is our first year together. We have forty thousand francs each for our share of the profits; and as I thought you might need a little money to give your wife a New Year's present——"

Ashamed to meet the eyes of the honest man whose confidence he was betraying, Fromont Jeune placed a bundle of cheques and notes on the table.

Risler was deeply moved for a moment. So much money at one time for him! His mind dwelt upon the generosity of these Fromonts, who had made him what he was; then he thought of his little Sidonie, of the longing which she had so often expressed and which he would now be able to gratify.

With tears in his eyes and a happy smile on his lips, he held out both hands to his partner.

"I am very happy! I am very happy!"

That was his favorite phrase on great occasions. Then he pointed to the bundles of bank notes spread out before him in the narrow bands which are used to confine those fugitive documents, always ready to fly away.

"Do you know what that is?" he said to Georges, with an air of triumph. "That is Sidonie's house in the country!"

CHAPTER XII

A LETTER

"To M. Frantz Risler,

"*Engineer of the Compagnie Française,*

"*Ismailia, Egypt.*

RANTZ, my boy, it is old Sigismond who is writing to you. If I knew better how to put my ideas on paper, I should have a very long story to tell you. But this infernal French is too hard, and Sigismond Planus is good for nothing away from his figures. So I will come to the point at once.

"Affairs in your brother's house are not as they should be. That woman is false to him with his partner. She has made her husband a laughing-stock, and if this goes on she will cause him to be looked upon as a rascal. Frantz, my boy, you must come home at once. You are the only one who can speak to Risler and open his eyes about that little Sidonie. He would not believe any of us. Ask leave of absence at once, and come.

"I know that you have your bread to earn out there, and your future to assure; but a man of honor should think more of the name his parents gave him than of anything else. And I tell you that if you do not come at once, a time will come when the name of Risler will be so overwhelmed with shame that you will not dare to bear it.

"Sigismond Planus,

"*Cashier.*"

CHAPTER XIII

THE JUDGE

HOSE persons who live always indoors, confined by work or infirmity to a chair by the window, take a deep interest in the people who pass, just as they make for themselves a horizon of the neighboring walls, roofs, and windows.

Nailed to their place, they live in the life of the streets; and the busy men and women who pass within their range of vision, sometimes every day at the same hour, do not suspect that they serve as the mainspring of other lives, that interested eyes watch for their coming and miss them if they happen to go to their destination by another road.

The Delobelles, left to themselves all day, indulged in this sort of silent observation. Their window was narrow, and the mother, whose eyes were beginning to weaken as the result of hard usage, sat near the light against the drawn muslin curtain; her daughter's large armchair was a little farther away. She announced the approach of their daily passers-by. It was a diversion, a subject of conversation; and the long hours of toil seemed shorter, marked off by the regular appearance of people who were as busy as they. There

were two little sisters, a gentleman in a gray overcoat, a child who was taken to school and taken home again, and an old government clerk with a wooden leg, whose step on the sidewalk had a sinister sound.

They hardly ever saw him; he passed after dark, but they heard him, and the sound always struck the little cripple's ears like a harsh echo of her own mournful thoughts. All these street friends unconsciously occupied a large place in the lives of the two women. If it rained, they would say:

"They will get wet. I wonder whether the child got home before the shower." And when the season changed, when the March sun inundated the sidewalks or the December snow covered them with its white mantle and its patches of black mud, the appearance of a new garment on one of their friends caused the two recluses to say to themselves, "It is summer," or, "winter has come."

Now, on a certain evening in May, one of those soft, luminous evenings when life flows forth from the houses into the street through the open windows, Désirée and her mother were busily at work with needles and fingers, exhausting the daylight to its last ray, before lighting the lamp. They could hear the shouts of children playing in the yards, the muffled notes of pianos, and the voice of a street peddler, drawing his half-empty wagon. One could smell the springtime in the air, a vague odor of hyacinth and lilac.

Mamma Delobelle had laid aside her work, and, before closing the window, leaned upon the sill listening to all these noises of a great toiling city, taking delight

in walking through the streets when its day's work was ended. From time to time she spoke to her daughter, without turning her head.

"Ah! there's Monsieur Sigismond. How early he leaves the factory to-night! It may be because the days are lengthening so fast, but I don't think it can be seven o'clock. Who can that man be with the old cashier?—What a funny thing!—One would say—Why, yes!—One would say it was Monsieur Frantz. But that isn't possible. Monsieur Frantz is a long way from here at this moment; and then he had no beard. That man looks like him all the same! Just look, my dear."

But "my dear" does not leave her chair; she does not even stir. With her eyes staring into vacancy, her needle in the air, arrested in its pretty, industrious movement, she has gone away to the blue country, that wonderful country whither one may go at will, without thought of any infirmity. The name "Frantz," uttered mechanically by her mother, because of a chance resemblance, represented to her a whole lifetime of illusions, of fervent hopes, ephemeral as the flush that rose to her cheeks when, on returning home at night, he used to come and chat with her a moment. How far away that was already! To think that he used to live in the little room near hers, that they used to hear his step on the stairs and the noise made by his table when he dragged it to the window to draw! What sorrow and what happiness she used to feel when he talked to her of Sidonie, sitting on the low chair at her knees, while she mounted her birds and her insects.

As she worked, she used to cheer and comfort him, for Sidonie had caused poor Frantz many little griefs before the last great one. His tone when he spoke of Sidonie, the sparkle in his eyes when he thought of her, fascinated Désirée in spite of everything, so that when he went away in despair, he left behind him a love even greater than that he carried with him—a love which the unchanging room, the sedentary, stagnant life, kept intact with all its bitter perfume, whereas his would gradually fade away and vanish in the fresh air of the outer world.

It grows darker and darker. A great wave of melancholy envelops the poor girl with the falling darkness of that balmy evening. The blissful gleam from the past dies away as the last glimmer of daylight vanishes in the narrow recess of the window, where her mother still stands leaning on the sill.

Suddenly the door opens. Some one is there whose features can not be distinguished. Who can it be? The Delobelles never receive calls. The mother, who has turned her head, thinks at first that some one has come from the shop to get the week's work.

"My husband has just gone to your place, Monsieur. We have nothing here. Monsieur Delobelle has taken everything."

The man comes forward without speaking, and as he approaches the window his features can be distinguished. He is a tall, solidly built fellow with a bronzed face, a thick, red beard, and a deep voice, and is a little slow of speech.

"Aha! so you don't know me, Mamma Delobelle?"

"Oh! I knew you at once, Monsieur Frantz," said Désirée, very calmly, in a cold, sedate tone.

"Merciful heavens! it's Monsieur Frantz."

Quickly Mamma Delobelle runs to the lamp, lights it, and closes the window.

"What! it is you, is it, my dear Frantz?" How coolly she says it, the little rascal! "I knew you at once." Ah, the little iceberg! She will always be the same.

A veritable little iceberg, in very truth. She is very pale, and her hand as it lies in Frantz's is white and cold.

She seems to him improved, even more refined than before. He seems to her superb, as always, with a melancholy, weary expression in the depths of his eyes, which makes him more of a man than when he went away.

His weariness is due to his hurried journey, undertaken immediately on his receipt of Sigismond's letter. Spurred on by the word *dishonor*, he had started instantly, without awaiting his leave of absence, risking his place and his future prospects; and, hurrying from steamships to railways, he had not stopped until he reached Paris. Reason enough for being weary, especially when one has travelled in eager haste to reach one's destination, and when one's mind has been continually beset by impatient thoughts, making the journey ten times over in incessant doubt and fear and perplexity.

His melancholy began further back. It began on the day when the woman he loved refused to marry

him, to become, six months later, the wife of his brother; two terrible blows in close succession, the second even more painful than the first. It is true that, before entering into that marriage, Risler had written to him to ask his permission to be happy, and had written in such touching, affectionate terms that the violence of the blow was somewhat diminished; and then, in due time, life in a strange country, hard work, and long journeys had softened his grief. Now only a vast background of melancholy remains; unless, indeed, the hatred and wrath by which he is animated at this moment against the woman who is dishonoring his brother may be a remnant of his former love.

But no! Frantz Risler thinks only of avenging the honor of the Rislers. He comes not as a lover, but as a judge; and Sidonie may well look to herself.

The judge had gone straight to the factory on leaving the train, relying upon the surprise, the unexpectedness, of his arrival to disclose to him at a glance what was taking place.

Unluckily he had found no one. The blinds of the little house at the foot of the garden had been closed for two weeks. Père Achille informed him that the ladies were at their respective country seats where the partners joined them every evening.

Fromont Jeune had left the factory very early; Risler Aîné had just gone. Frantz decided to speak to old Sigismond. But it was Saturday, the regular pay-day, and he must needs wait until the long line of workmen, extending from Achille's lodge to the cashier's grated window, had gradually dispersed.

Although very impatient and very depressed, the excellent youth, who had lived the life of a Paris workingman from his childhood, felt a thrill of pleasure at finding himself once more in the midst of the animated scenes peculiar to that time and place. Upon all those faces, honest or vicious, was an expression of satisfaction that the week was at an end. You felt that, so far as they were concerned, Sunday began at seven o'clock Saturday evening, in front of the cashier's little lamp.

One must have lived among workingmen to realize the full charm of that one day's rest and its solemnity. Many of these poor creatures, bound fast to unhealthful trades, await the coming of the blessed Sunday like a puff of refreshing air, essential to their health and their life. What an overflow of spirits, therefore, what a pressing need of noisy mirth! It seems as if the oppression of the week's labor vanishes with the steam from the machinery, as it escapes in a hissing cloud of vapor over the gutters.

One by one the workmen moved away from the grating, counting the money that glistened in their black hands. There were disappointments, mutterings, remonstrances, hours missed, money drawn in advance; and above the tinkling of coins, Sigismond's voice could be heard, calm and relentless, defending the interests of his employers with a zeal amounting to ferocity.

Frantz was familiar with all the dramas of pay-day, the false accents and the true. He knew that one man's wages were expended for his family, to pay the baker and the druggist, or for his children's schooling.

Another wanted his money for the wine-shop or for something even worse. And the melancholy, downcast shadows passing to and fro in front of the factory gateway—he knew what they were waiting for—that they were all on the watch for a father or a husband, to hurry him home with complaining or coaxing words.

Oh! the barefooted children, the tiny creatures wrapped in old shawls, the shabby women, whose tear-stained faces were as white as the linen caps that surmounted them.

Oh! the lurking vice that prowls about on pay-day, the candles that are lighted in the depths of dark alleys, the dirty windows of the wine-shops where the thousand-and-one poisonous concoctions of alcohol display their alluring colors.

Frantz was familiar with all these forms of misery; but never had they seemed to him so depressing, so harrowing as on that evening.

When the last man was paid, Sigismond came out of his office. The two friends recognized each other and embraced; and in the silence of the factory, at rest for twenty-four hours and deathly still in all its empty buildings, the cashier explained to Frantz the state of affairs. He described Sidonie's conduct, her mad extravagance, the total wreck of the family honor. The Rislers had bought a country house at Asnières, formerly the property of an actress, and had set up a sumptuous establishment there. They had horses and carriages, and led a luxurious, gay life. The thing that especially disturbed honest Sigismond was the self-restraint of Fromont Jeune. For some time he had

drawn almost no money from the strong-box, and yet Sidonie was spending more than ever.

"*I haf no gonfidence!*" said the unhappy cashier, shaking his head, "*I haf no gonfidence!*"

Lowering his voice he added:

"But your brother, my little Frantz, your brother? Who can explain his actions? He goes about through it all with his eyes in the air, his hands in his pockets, his mind on his famous invention, which unfortunately doesn't move fast. Look here! do you want me to give you my opinion?—He's either a knave or a fool."

They were walking up and down the little garden as they talked, stopping for a moment, then resuming their walk. Frantz felt as if he were living in a horrible dream. The rapid journey, the sudden change of scene and climate, the ceaseless flow of Sigismond's words, the new idea that he had to form of Risler and Sidonie —the same Sidonie he had loved so dearly—all these things bewildered him and almost drove him mad.

It was late. Night was falling. Sigismond proposed to him to go to Montrouge for the night; he declined on the plea of fatigue, and when he was left alone in the Marais, at that dismal and uncertain hour when the daylight has faded and the gas is still unlighted, he walked instinctively toward his old quarters on the Rue de Braque.

At the hall door hung a placard: *Bachelor's Chamber to let.*

It was the same room in which he had lived so long with his brother. He recognized the map fastened to the wall by four pins, the window on the landing, and

the Delobelles' little sign: *Birds and Insects for Ornament.*

Their door was ajar; he had only to push it a little in order to enter the room.

Certainly there was not in all Paris a surer refuge for him, a spot better fitted to welcome and console his perturbed spirit, than that hard-working familiar fireside. In his present agitation and perplexity it was like the harbor with its smooth, deep water, the sunny, peaceful quay, where the women work while awaiting their husbands and fathers, though the wind howls and the sea rages. More than all else, although he did not realize that it was so, it was a network of steadfast affection, that miraculous love-kindness which makes another's love precious to us even when we do not love that other.

That dear little iceberg of a Désirée loved him so dearly. Her eyes sparkled so even when talking of the most indifferent things with him. As objects dipped in phosphorus shine with equal splendor, so the most trivial words she said illuminated her pretty, radiant face. What a blissful rest it was for him after Sigismond's brutal disclosures!

They talked together with great animation while Mamma Delobelle was setting the table.

"You will dine with us, won't you, Monsieur Frantz? Father has gone to take back the work; but he will surely come home to dinner."

He will surely come home to dinner!

The good woman said it with a certain pride.

In fact, since the failure of his managerial scheme, the illustrious Delobelle no longer took his meals abroad,

even on the evenings when he went to collect the weekly earnings. The unlucky manager had eaten so many meals on credit at his restaurant that he dared not go there again. By way of compensation, he never failed, on Saturday, to bring home with him two or three unexpected, famished guests—"old comrades"—"unlucky devils." So it happened that, on the evening in question, he appeared upon the stage escorting a *financier* from the Metz theatre and a *comique* from the theatre at Angers, both waiting for an engagement.

The *comique*, closely shaven, wrinkled, shrivelled by the heat from the footlights, looked like an old street-arab; the *financier* wore cloth shoes, and no linen, so far as could be seen.

"Frantz!—my Frantz!" cried the old strolling player in a melodramatic voice, clutching the air convulsively with his hands. After a long and energetic embrace he presented his guests to one another.

"Monsieur Robricart, of the theatre at Metz.

"Monsieur Chaudezon, of the theatre at Angers.

"Frantz Risler, engineer."

In Delobelle's mouth that word "engineer" assumed vast proportions!

Désirée pouted prettily when she saw her father's friends. It would have been so nice to be by themselves on a day like to-day. But the great man snapped his fingers at the thought. He had enough to do to unload his pockets. First of all, he produced a superb pie —"for the ladies," he said, forgetting that he adored pie. A lobster next made its appearance, then an Arles sausage, marrons glacés and cherries, the first of the season!

While the *financier* enthusiastically pulled up the collar of his invisible shirt, while the *comique* exclaimed "*gnouf! gnouf!*" with a gesture forgotten by Parisians for ten years, Désirée thought with dismay of the enormous hole that impromptu banquet would make in the paltry earnings of the week, and Mamma Delobelle, full of business, upset the whole buffet in order to find a sufficient number of plates.

It was a very lively meal. The two actors ate voraciously, to the great delight of Delobelle, who talked over with them old memories of their days of strolling. Fancy a collection of odds and ends of scenery, extinct lanterns, and mouldy, crumbling stage properties.

In a sort of vulgar, meaningless, familiar slang, they recalled their innumerable triumphs; for all three of them, according to their own stories, had been applauded, laden with laurel-wreaths, and carried in triumph by whole cities.

While they talked they ate as actors usually eat, sitting with their faces turned three-fourths toward the audience, with the unnatural haste of stage guests at a pasteboard supper, alternating words and mouthfuls, seeking to produce an effect by their manner of putting down a glass or moving a chair, and expressing interest, amazement, joy, terror, surprise, with the aid of a skilfully handled knife and fork. Madame Delobelle listened to them with a smiling face.

One can not be an actor's wife for thirty years without becoming somewhat accustomed to these peculiar mannerisms.

But one little corner of the table was separated from

the rest of the party as by a cloud which intercepted the absurd remarks, the hoarse laughter, the boasting. Frantz and Désirée talked together in undertones, hearing naught of what was said around them. Things that happened in their childhood, anecdotes of the neighborhood, a whole ill-defined past which derived its only value from the mutual memories evoked, from the spark that glowed in the eyes of both—those were the themes of their pleasant chat.

Suddenly the cloud was torn aside, and Delobelle's terrible voice interrupted the dialogue.

"Have you not seen your brother?" he asked, in order to avoid the appearance of neglecting him too much. "And you have not seen his wife, either?—Ah! you will find her a Madame. Such toilettes, my dear fellow, and such *chic!* I assure you. They have a genuine château at Asnières. The Chèbes are there also. Ah! my old friend, they have all left us behind. They are rich, they look down on old friends. Never a word, never a call. For my part, you understand, I snap my fingers at them, but it really wounds these ladies."

"Oh, papa!" said Dèsirèe hastily, "you know very well that we are too fond of Sidonie to be offended with her."

The actor smote the table a violent blow with his fist.

"Why, then, you do wrong. You ought to be offended with people who seek always to wound and humiliate you."

He still had upon his mind the refusal to furnish

funds for his theatrical project, and he made no secret of his wrath.

"If you knew," he said to Frantz, "if you knew how money is being squandered over yonder! It is a great pity. And nothing substantial, nothing sensible. I—I who speak to you, asked your brother for a paltry sum to assure my future and himself a handsome profit. He flatly refused. *Parbleu!* Madame requires too much. She rides, goes to the races in her carriage, and drives her husband at the same rate as her little phaeton on the quay at Asnières. Between you and me, I don't think that our good friend Risler is very happy. That woman makes him believe black is white."

The ex-actor concluded his harangue with a wink at the *comique* and the *financier*, and for a moment the three exchanged glances, conventional grimaces, *ha-has!* and *hum-hums!* and all the usual pantomime expressive of thoughts too deep for words.

Frantz was struck dumb. Do what he would, the horrible certainty assailed him on all sides. Sigismond had spoken in accordance with his nature, Delobelle with his. The result was the same.

Fortunately the dinner was drawing near its close. The three actors left the table and betook themselves to the brewery on the Rue Blondel. Frantz remained with the two women.

As he sat beside her, gentle and affectionate in manner, Désirée was suddenly conscious of a great outflow of gratitude to Sidonie. She said to herself that, after all, it was to her generosity that she owed this sem-

blance of happiness, and that thought gave her courage to defend her former friend.

"You see, Monsieur Frantz, you mustn't believe all my father told you about your sister-in-law. Dear papa! he always exaggerates a little. For my own part, I am very sure that Sidonie is incapable of all the evil she is accused of. I am sure that her heart has remained the same, and that she is still fond of her friends, although she does neglect them a little. Such is life, you know. Friends drift apart without meaning to. Isn't that true, Monsieur Frantz?"

Oh! how pretty she was in his eyes, while she talked in that strain. He never had taken so much notice of the refined features, the aristocratic pallor of her complexion; and when he left her that evening, deeply touched by the warmth she had displayed in defending Sidonie, by all the charming feminine excuses she put forward for her friend's silence and neglect, Frantz Risler reflected, with a feeling of selfish and ingenuous pleasure, that the child had loved him once, and that perhaps she loved him still, and kept for him in the bottom of her heart that warm, sheltered spot to which we turn as to the sanctuary when life has wounded us.

All night long in his old room, lulled by the imaginary movement of the vessel, by the murmur of the waves and the howling of the wind which follow long sea voyages, he dreamed of his youthful days, of little Chèbe and Désirée Delobelle, of their games, their labors, and of the Ecole Centrale, whose great, gloomy buildings were sleeping near at hand, in the dark streets of the Marais.

And when daylight came, and the sun shining in at his bare window vexed his eyes and brought him back to a realization of the duty that lay before him and to the anxieties of the day, he dreamed that it was time to go to the School, and that his brother, before going down to the factory, opened the door and called to him:

"Come, lazybones! Come!"

That dear, loving voice, too natural, too real for a dream, made him open his eyes without more ado.

Risler was standing by his bed, watching his awakening with a charming smile, not untinged by emotion; that it was Risler himself was evident from the fact that, in his joy at seeing his brother Frantz once more, he could find nothing better to say than, "I am very happy, I am very happy!"

Although it was Sunday, Risler, as was his custom, had come to the factory to avail himself of the silence and solitude to work at his press. Immediately on his arrival, Père Achille had informed him that his brother was in Paris and had gone to the old house on the Rue de Braque, and he had hastened thither in joyful surprise, a little vexed that he had not been forewarned, and especially that Frantz had defrauded him of the first evening. His regret on that account came to the surface every moment in his spasmodic attempts at conversation, in which everything that he wanted to say was left unfinished, interrupted by innumerable questions on all sorts of subjects and explosions of affection and joy. Frantz excused himself on the plea of fatigue, and the pleasure it had given him to be in their old room once more.

"All right, all right," said Risler, "but I sha'n't let you alone now—you are coming to Asnières at once. I give myself leave of absence to-day. All thought of work is out of the question now that you have come, you understand. Ah! won't the little one be surprised and glad! We talk about you so often! What joy! what joy!"

The poor fellow fairly beamed with happiness; he, the silent man, chattered like a magpie, gazed admiringly at his Frantz and remarked upon his growth. The pupil of the Ecole Centrale had had a fine physique when he went away, but his features had acquired greater firmness, his shoulders were broader, and it was a far cry from the tall, studious-looking boy who had left Paris two years before, for Ismailia, to this handsome, bronzed corsair, with his serious yet winning face.

While Risler was gazing at him, Frantz, on his side, was closely scrutinizing his brother, and, finding him the same as always, as ingenuous, as loving, and as absent-minded as times, he said to himself:

"No! it is not possible—he has not ceased to be an honest man."

Thereupon, as he reflected upon what people had dared to imagine, all his wrath turned against that hypocritical, vicious woman, who deceived her husband so impudently and with such absolute impunity that she succeeded in causing him to be considered her confederate. Oh! what a terrible reckoning he proposed to have with her; how pitilessly he would talk to her!

"I forbid you, Madame—understand what I say—I forbid you to dishonor my brother!"

He was thinking of that all the way, as he watched the still leafless trees glide along the embankment of the Saint-Germain railway. Sitting opposite him, Risler chattered, chattered without pause. He talked about the factory, about their business. They had gained forty thousand francs each the last year; but it would be a different matter when the Press was at work. "A rotary press, my little Frantz, rotary and dodecagonal, capable of printing a pattern in twelve to fifteen colors at a single turn of the wheel—red on pink, dark green on light green, without the least running together or absorption, without a line lapping over its neighbor, without any danger of one shade destroying or overshadowing another. Do you understand that, little brother? A machine that is an artist like a man. It means a revolution in the wall-paper trade."

"But," queried Frantz with some anxiety, "have you invented this Press of yours yet, or are you still hunting for it?"

"Invented!—perfected! To-morrow I will show you all my plans. I have also invented an automatic crane for hanging the paper on the rods in the drying-room. Next week I intend to take up my quarters in the factory, up in the garret, and have my first machine made there secretly, under my own eyes. In three months the patents must be taken out and the Press must be at work. You'll see, my little Frantz, it will make us all rich—you can imagine how glad I shall be to be able to make up to these Fromonts for a little of what they

have done for me. Ah! upon my word, the Lord has been too good to me."

Thereupon he began to enumerate all his blessings. Sidonie was the best of women, a little love of a wife, who conferred much honor upon him. They had a charming home. They went into society, very select society. The little one sang like a nightingale, thanks to Madame Dobson's expressive method. By the way, this Madame Dobson was another most excellent creature. There was just one thing that disturbed poor Risler, that was his incomprehensible misunderstanding with Sigismond. Perhaps Frantz could help him to clear up that mystery.

"Oh! yes, I will help you, brother," replied Frantz through his clenched teeth; and an angry flush rose to his brow at the idea that any one could have suspected the open-heartedness, the loyalty, that were displayed before him in all their artless spontaneity. Luckily he, the judge, had arrived; and he proposed to restore everything to its proper place.

Meanwhile, they were drawing near the house at Asnières. Frantz had noticed at a distance a fanciful little turreted affair, glistening with a new blue slate roof. It seemed to him to have been built expressly for Sidonie, a fitting cage for that capricious, gaudy-plumaged bird.

It was a châlet with two stories, whose bright mirrors and pink-lined curtains could be seen from the railway, shining resplendent at the far end of a green lawn, where an enormous pewter ball was suspended.

The river was near at hand, still wearing its Parisian

aspect, filled with chains, bathing establishments, great barges, and multitudes of little skiffs, with a layer of coal-dust on their pretentious, freshly-painted names, tied to the pier and rocking to the slightest motion of the water. From her windows Sidonie could see the restaurants on the beach, silent through the week, but filled to overflowing on Sunday with a motley, noisy crowd, whose shouts of laughter, mingled with the dull splash of oars, came from both banks to meet in mid-stream in that current of vague murmurs, shouts, calls, laughter, and singing that floats without ceasing up and down the Seine on holidays for a distance of ten miles.

During the week she saw shabbily-dressed idlers sauntering along the shore, men in broad-brimmed straw hats and flannel shirts, women who sat on the worn grass of the sloping bank, doing nothing, with the dreamy eyes of a cow at pasture. All the peddlers, hand-organs, harpists, travelling jugglers, stopped there as at a quarantine station. The quay was crowded with them, and as they approached, the windows in the little houses near by were always thrown open, disclosing white dressing-jackets, half-buttoned, heads of dishevelled hair, and an occasional pipe, all watching these paltry strolling shows, as if with a sigh of regret for Paris, so near at hand. It was a hideous and depressing sight.

The grass, which had hardly begun to grow, was already turning yellow beneath the feet of the crowd. The dust was black; and yet, every Thursday, the cocotte aristocracy passed through on the way to the

Casino, with a great show of rickety carriages and borrowed postilions. All these things gave pleasure to that fanatical Parisian, Sidonie; and then, too, in her childhood, she had heard a great deal about Asnières from the illustrious Delobelle, who would have liked to have, like so many of his profession, a little villa in those latitudes, a cozy nook in the country to which to return by the midnight train, after the play is done.

All these dreams of little Chèbe, Sidonie Risler had realized.

The brothers went to the gate opening on the quay, in which the key was usually left. They entered, making their way among trees and shrubs of recent growth. Here and there the billiard-room, the gardener's lodge, a little greenhouse, made their appearance, like the pieces of one of the Swiss châlets we give to children to play with; all very light and fragile, hardly more than resting on the ground, as if ready to fly away at the slightest breath of bankruptcy or caprice: the villa of a cocotte or a pawnbroker.

Frantz looked about in some bewilderment. In the distance, opening on a porch surrounded by vases of flowers, was the salon with its long blinds raised. An American easy-chair, folding-chairs, a small table from which the coffee had not been removed, could be seen near the door. Within they heard a succession of loud chords on the piano and the murmur of low voices.

"I tell you Sidonie will be surprised," said honest Risler, walking softly on the gravel; "she doesn't expect me until to-night. She and Madame Dobson are practising together at this moment."

Pushing the door open suddenly, he cried from the threshold in his loud, good-natured voice:

"Guess whom I've brought."

Madame Dobson, who was sitting alone at the piano, jumped up from her stool, and at the farther end of the grand salon Georges and Sidonie rose hastily behind the exotic plants that reared their heads above a table, of whose delicate, slender lines they seemed a prolongation.

"Ah! how you frightened me!" said Sidonie, running to meet Risler.

The flounces of her white *peignoir*, through which blue ribbons were drawn, like little patches of blue sky among the clouds, rolled in billows over the carpet, and, having already recovered from her embarrassment, she stood very straight, with an affable expression and her everlasting little smile, as she kissed her husband and offered her forehead to Frantz, saying:

"Good morning, brother."

Risler left them confronting each other, and went up to Fromont Jeune, whom he was greatly surprised to find there.

"What, Chorche, you here? I supposed you were at Savigny."

"Yes, to be sure, but—I came—I thought you stayed at Asnières Sundays. I wanted to speak to you on a matter of business."

Thereupon, entangling himself in his words, he began to talk hurriedly of an important order. Sidonie had disappeared after exchanging a few unmeaning words with the impassive Frantz. Madame Dobson

continued her tremolos on the soft pedal, like those which accompany critical situations at the theatre.

In very truth, the situation at that moment was decidedly strained. But Risler's good-humor banished all constraint. He apologized to his partner for not being at home, and insisted upon showing Frantz the house. They went from the salon to the stable, from the stable to the carriage-house, the servants' quarters, and the conservatory. Everything was new, brilliant, gleaming, too small, and inconvenient.

"But," said Risler, with a certain pride, "it cost a heap of money!"

He persisted in compelling admiration of Sidonie's purchase even to its smallest details, exhibited the gas and water fixtures on every floor, the improved system of bells, the garden seats, the English billiard-table, the hydropathic arrangements, and accompanied his exposition with outbursts of gratitude to Fromont Jeune, who, by taking him into partnership, had literally placed a fortune in his hands.

At each new effusion on Risler's part, Georges Fromont shrank visibly, ashamed and embarrassed by the strange expression on Frantz's face.

The breakfast was lacking in gayety.

Madame Dobson talked almost without interruption, overjoyed to be swimming in the shallows of a romantic love-affair. Knowing, or rather believing that she knew her friend's story from beginning to end, she understood the lowering wrath of Frantz, a former lover furious at finding his place filled, and the anxiety of Georges, due to the appearance of a rival; and she en-

couraged one with a glance, consoled the other with a smile, admired Sidonie's tranquil demeanor, and reserved all her contempt for that abominable Risler, the vulgar, uncivilized tyrant. She made an effort to prevent any of those horrible periods of silence, when the clashing knives and forks mark time in such an absurd and embarrassing way.

As soon as breakfast was at an end Fromont Jeune announced that he must return to Savigny. Risler did not venture to detain him, thinking that his dear Madame Chorche would pass her Sunday all alone; and so, without an opportunity to say a word to his mistress, the lover went away in the bright sunlight to take an afternoon train, still attended by the husband, who insisted upon escorting him to the station.

Madame Dobson sat for a moment with Frantz and Sidonie under a little arbor which a climbing vine studded with pink buds; then, realizing that she was in the way, she returned to the salon, and as before, while Georges was there, began to play and sing softly and with expression. In the silent garden, that muffled music, gliding between the branches, seemed like the cooing of birds before the storm.

At last they were alone. Under the lattice of the arbor, still bare and leafless, the May sun shone too bright. Sidonie shaded her eyes with her hand as she watched the people passing on the quay. Frantz likewise looked out, but in another direction; and both of them, affecting to be entirely independent of each other, turned at the same instant with the same gesture and moved by the same thought.

"I have something to say to you," he said, just as she opened her mouth.

"And I to you," she replied gravely; "but come in here; we shall be more comfortable."

And they entered together a little summer-house at the foot of the garden.

CHAPTER XIV

EXPLANATION

BY slow degrees Sidonie sank to her former level, yes, even lower. From the rich, well-considered *bourgeoise* to which her marriage had raised her, she descended the ladder to the rank of a mere toy. By dint of travelling in railway carriages with fantastically dressed courtesans, with their hair worn over their eyes like a terrier's, or falling over the back *à la* Geneviève de Brabant, she came at last to resemble them. She transformed herself into a blonde for two months, to the unbounded amazement of Risler, who could not understand how his doll was so changed. As for Georges, all these eccentricities amused him; it seemed to him that he had ten women in one. He was the real husband, the master of the house.

To divert Sidonie's thoughts, he had provided a simulacrum of society for her—his bachelor friends, a few fast tradesmen, almost no women, women have too sharp eyes. Madame Dobson was the only friend of Sidonie's sex.

They organized grand dinner-parties, excursions on the water, fireworks. From day to day Risler's posi-

tion became more absurd, more distressing. When he came home in the evening, tired out, shabbily dressed, he must hurry up to his room to dress.

"We have some people to dinner," his wife would say. "Make haste."

And he would be the last to take his place at the table, after shaking hands all around with his guests, friends of Fromont Jeune, whom he hardly knew by name. Strange to say, the affairs of the factory were often discussed at that table, to which Georges brought his acquaintances from the club with the tranquil self-assurance of the gentleman who pays.

"Business breakfasts and dinners!" To Risler's mind that phrase explained everything: his partner's constant presence, his choice of guests, and the marvellous gowns worn by Sidonie, who beautified herself in the interests of the firm. This coquetry on his mistress's part drove Fromont Jeune to despair. Day after day he came unexpectedly to take her by surprise, uneasy, suspicious, afraid to leave that perverse and deceitful character to its own devices for long.

"What in the deuce has become of your husband?" Père Gardinois would ask his grand-daughter with a cunning leer. "Why doesn't he come here oftener?"

Claire apologized for Georges, but his continual neglect began to disturb her. She wept now when she received the little notes, the despatches which arrived daily at the dinner-hour: "Don't expect me to-night, dear love. I shall not be able to come to Savigny until to-morrow or the day after by the night-train."

She ate her dinner sadly, opposite an empty chair,

and although she did not know that she was betrayed, she felt that her husband was becoming accustomed to living away from her. He was so absent-minded when a family gathering or some other unavoidable duty detained him at the château, so silent concerning what was in his mind. Claire, having now only the most distant relations with Sidonie, knew nothing of what was taking place at Asnières: but when Georges left her, apparently eager to be gone, and with smiling face, she tormented her loneliness with unavowed suspicions, and, like all those who anticipate a great sorrow, she suddenly became conscious of a great void in her heart, a place made ready for disasters to come.

Her husband was hardly happier than she. That cruel Sidonie seemed to take pleasure in tormenting him. She allowed everybody to pay court to her. At that moment a certain Cazabon, *alias* Cazaboni, an Italian tenor from Toulouse, introduced by Madame Dobson, came every day to sing disturbing duets. Georges, jealous beyond words, hurried to Asnières in the afternoon, neglecting everything, and was already beginning to think that Risler did not watch his wife closely enough. He would have liked him to be blind only so far as he was concerned.

Ah! if he had been her husband, what a tight rein he would have kept on her! But he had no power over her and she was not at all backward about telling him so. Sometimes, too, with the invincible logic that often occurs to the greatest fools, he reflected that, as he was deceiving his friend, perhaps he deserved to be deceived. In short, his was a wretched life. He passed

his time running about to jewellers and dry-goods dealers, inventing gifts and surprises. Ah! he knew her well. He knew that he could pacify her with trinkets, yet not retain his hold upon her, and that, when the day came that she was bored——

But Sidonie was not bored as yet. She was living the life that she longed to live; she had all the happiness she could hope to attain. There was nothing passionate or romantic about her feeling for Georges. He was like a second husband to her, younger and, above all, richer than the other. To complete the vulgarization of their *liaison*, she had summoned her parents to Asnières, lodged them in a little house in the country, and made of that vain and wilfully blind father and that affectionate, still bewildered mother a halo of respectability of which she felt the necessity as she sank lower and lower.

Everything was shrewdly planned in that perverse little brain, which reflected coolly upon vice; and it seemed to her as if she might continue to live thus in peace, when Frantz Risler suddenly arrived.

Simply from seeing him enter the room, she had realized that her repose was threatened, that an interview of the gravest importance was to take place between them.

Her plan was formed on the instant. She must at once put it into execution.

The summer-house that they entered contained one large, circular room with four windows, each looking out upon a different landscape; it was furnished for the

purposes of summer siestas, for the hot hours when one seeks shelter from the sunlight and the noises of the garden. A broad, very low divan ran all around the wall. A small lacquered table, also very low, stood in the middle of the room, covered with odd numbers of society journals.

The hangings were new, and the Persian pattern—birds flying among bluish reeds—produced the effect of a dream in summer, ethereal figures floating before one's languid eyes. The lowered blinds, the matting on the floor, the Virginia jasmine clinging to the trellis-work outside, produced a refreshing coolness which was enhanced by the splashing in the river near by, and the lapping of its wavelets on the shore.

Sidonie sat down as soon as she entered the room, pushing aside her long white skirt, which sank like a mass of snow at the foot of the divan; and with sparkling eyes and a smile playing about her lips, bending her little head slightly, its saucy coquettishness heightened by the bow of ribbon on the side, she waited.

Frantz, pale as death, remained standing, looking about the room. After a moment he began:

"I congratulate you, Madame; you understand how to make yourself comfortable."

And in the next breath, as if he were afraid that the conversation, beginning at such a distance, would not arrive quickly enough at the point to which he intended to lead it, he added brutally:

"To whom do you owe this magnificence, to your lover or your husband?"

Without moving from the divan, without even raising her eyes to his, she answered:

"To both."

He was a little disconcerted by such self-possession.

"Then you confess that that man is your lover?"

"Confess it!—yes!"

Frantz gazed at her a moment without speaking. She, too, had turned pale, notwithstanding her calmness, and the eternal little smile no longer quivered at the corners of her mouth.

He continued:

"Listen to me, Sidonie! My brother's name, the name he gave his wife, is mine as well. Since Risler is so foolish, so blind as to allow the name to be dishonored by you, it is my place to defend it against your attacks. I beg you, therefore, to inform Monsieur Georges Fromont that he must change mistresses as soon as possible, and go elsewhere to ruin himself. If not——"

"If not?" queried Sidonie, who had not ceased to play with her rings while he was speaking.

"If not, I shall tell my brother what is going on in his house, and you will be surprised at the Risler whose acquaintance you will make then—a man as violent and ungovernable as he usually is inoffensive. My disclosure will kill him perhaps, but you can be sure that he will kill you first."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Very well! let him kill me. What do I care for that?"

This was said with such a heartbroken, despondent

air that Frantz, in spite of himself, felt a little pity for that beautiful, fortunate young creature, who talked of dying with such self-abandonment.

"Do you love him so dearly?" he said, in an indefinably milder tone. "Do you love this Fromont so dearly that you prefer to die rather than renounce him?"

She drew herself up hastily.

"I? Love that fop, that doll, that silly girl in men's clothes? Nonsense!—I took him as I would have taken any other man."

"Why?"

"Because I couldn't help it, because I was mad, because I had and still have in my heart a criminal love, which I am determined to tear out, no matter at what cost."

She had risen and was speaking with her eyes in his, her lips near his, trembling from head to foot.

A criminal love?—Whom did she love, in God's name?

Frantz was afraid to question her.

Although suspecting nothing as yet, he had a feeling that that glance, that breath, leaning toward him, were about to make some horrible disclosure.

But his office of judge made it necessary for him to know all.

"Who is it?" he asked.

She replied in a stifled voice:

"You know very well that it is you."

She was his brother's wife.

For two years he had not thought of her except as

a sister. In his eyes his brother's wife in no way resembled his former fiancée, and it would have been a crime to recognize in a single feature of her face the woman to whom he had formerly so often said, "I love you."

And now it was she who said that she loved him.

The unhappy judge was thunderstruck, dazed, could find no words in which to reply.

She, standing before him, waited.

It was one of those spring days, full of heat and light, to which the moisture of recent rains imparts a strange softness and melancholy. The air was warm, perfumed by fresh flowers which, on that first day of heat, gave forth their fragrance eagerly, like violets hidden in a muff. Through its long, open windows the room in which they were inhaled all those intoxicating odors. Outside, they could hear the Sunday organs, distant shouts on the river, and nearer at hand, in the garden, Madame Dobson's amorous, languishing voice, sighing:

"On dit que tu te maries ;
Tu sais que j'en puis mouri-i-i-r !"

"Yes, Frantz, I have always loved you," said Sidonie. "That love which I renounced long ago because I was a young girl—and young girls do not know what they are doing—that love nothing has ever succeeded in destroying or lessening. When I learned that Désirée also loved you, the unfortunate, penniless child, in a great outburst of generosity I determined to assure her happiness for life by sacrificing my own, and I at once

turned you away, so that you should go to her. Ah! as soon as you had gone, I realized that the sacrifice was beyond my strength. Poor little Désirée! How I cursed her in the bottom of my heart! Will you believe it? Since that time I have avoided seeing her, meeting her. The sight of her caused me too much pain."

"But if you loved me," asked Frantz, in a low voice, "if you loved me, why did you marry my brother?"

She did not waver.

"To marry Risler was to bring myself nearer to you. I said to myself: 'I could not be his wife. Very well, I will be his sister. At all events, in that way it will still be allowable for me to love him, and we shall not pass our whole lives as strangers.' Alas! those are the innocent dreams a girl has at twenty, dreams of which she very soon learns the impossibility. I could not love you as a sister, Frantz; I could not forget you, either; my marriage prevented that. With another husband I might perhaps have succeeded, but with Risler it was terrible. He was forever talking about you and your success and your future—Frantz said this; Frantz did that— He loves you so well, poor fellow! And then the most cruel thing to me is that your brother looks like you. There is a sort of family resemblance in your features, in your gait, in your voices especially, for I have often closed my eyes under his caresses, saying to myself, 'It is he, it is Frantz.' When I saw that that wicked thought was becoming a source of torment to me, something that I could not escape, I tried to find distraction, I consented to listen to this

Georges, who had been pestering me for a long time, to transform my life to one of noise and excitement. But I swear to you, Frantz, that in that whirlpool of pleasure into which I then plunged, I never have ceased to think of you, and if any one had a right to come here and call me to account for my conduct, you certainly are not the one, for you, unintentionally, have made me what I am."

She paused. Frantz dared not raise his eyes to her face. For a moment past she had seemed to him too lovely, too alluring. She was his brother's wife!

Nor did he dare speak. The unfortunate youth felt that the old passion was despotically taking possession of his heart once more, and that at that moment glances, words, everything that burst forth from it would be love.

And she was his brother's wife!

"Ah! wretched, wretched creatures that we are!" exclaimed the poor judge, dropping upon the divan beside her.

Those few words were in themselves an act of cowardice, a beginning of surrender, as if destiny, by showing itself so pitiless, had deprived him of the strength to defend himself. Sidonie had placed her hand on his. "Frantz—Frantz!" she said; and they remained there side by side, silent and burning with emotion, soothed by Madame Dobson's romance, which reached their ears by snatches through the shrubbery:

"Ton amour, c'est ma jolie.
Hélas! je n'en puis guéri-i-i-r."

Suddenly Risler's tall figure appeared in the doorway.

"This way, Chèbe, this way. They are in the summer-house."

As he spoke the husband entered, escorting his father-in-law and mother-in-law, whom he had gone to fetch.

There was a moment of effusive greetings and innumerable embraces. You should have seen the patronizing air with which M. Chèbe scrutinized the young man, who was head and shoulders taller than he.

"Well, my boy, does the Suez Canal progress as you would wish?"

Madame Chèbe, in whose thoughts Frantz had never ceased to be her future son-in-law, threw her arms around him, while Risler, tactless as usual in his gayety and his enthusiasm, waved his arms, talked of killing several fatted calves to celebrate the return of the prodigal son, and roared to the singing-mistress in a voice that echoed through the neighboring gardens:

"Madame Dobson, Madame Dobson—if you'll allow me, it's a pity for you to be singing there. To the devil with sadness for to-day! Play us something lively, a good waltz, so that I can take a turn with Madame Chèbe."

"Risler, Risler, are you crazy, my son-in-law?"

"Come, come, mamma! We must dance."

And up and down the paths, to the strains of an automatic six-step waltz—a genuine *valse de Vaucan-*

son— he dragged his breathless mamma-in-law, who stopped at every step to restore to their usual orderliness the dangling ribbons of her hat and the lace trimming of her shawl, her lovely shawl bought for Sidonie's wedding.

Poor Risler was intoxicated with joy.

To Frantz that was an endless, indelible day of agony. Driving, rowing on the river, lunch on the grass on the Ile des Ravageurs—he was spared none of the charms of Asnières; and all the time, in the dazzling sunlight of the roads, in the glare reflected by the water, he must laugh and chatter, describe his journey, talk of the Isthmus of Suez and the great work undertaken there, listen to the whispered complaints of M. Chèbe, who was still incensed with his children, and to his brother's description of the Press. "Rotary, my dear Frantz, rotary and dodecagonal!" Sidonie left the gentlemen to their conversation and seemed absorbed in deep thought. From time to time she said a word or two to Madame Dobson, or smiled sadly at her, and Frantz, not daring to look at her, followed the motions of her blue-lined parasol and of the white flounces of her skirt.

How she had changed in two years! How lovely she had grown!

Then horrible thoughts came to his mind. There were races at Longchamps that day. Carriages passed theirs, rubbed against it, driven by women with painted faces, closely veiled. Sitting motionless on the box, they held their long whips straight in the air, with doll-like gestures, and nothing about them seemed alive

except their blackened eyes, fixed on the horses' heads. As they passed, people turned to look. Every eye followed them, as if drawn by the wind caused by their rapid motion.

Sidonie resembled those creatures. She might herself have driven Georges' carriage; for Frantz was in Georges' carriage. He had drunk Georges' wine. All the luxurious enjoyment of that family party came from Georges.

It was shameful, revolting! He would have liked to shout the whole story to his brother. Indeed, it was his duty, as he had come there for that express purpose. But he no longer felt the courage to do it. Ah! the unhappy judge!

That evening after dinner, in the salon open to the fresh breeze from the river, Risler begged his wife to sing. He wished her to exhibit all her newly acquired accomplishments to Frantz.

Sidonie, leaning on the piano, objected with a melancholy air, while Madame Dobson ran her fingers over the keys, shaking her long curls.

"But I don't know anything. What do you wish me to sing?"

She ended, however, by being persuaded. Pale, disenchanted, with her mind upon other things, in the flickering light of the candles which seemed to be burning incense, the air was so heavy with the odor of the hyacinths and lilacs in the garden, she began a Creole ballad very popular in Louisiana, which Madame Dobson herself had arranged for the voice and piano:

"Pauv' pitit Mam'zelle Zizi,
C'est l'amou, l'amou qui tourne la tête à li." *

And as she told the story of the ill-fated little Zizi, who was driven mad by passion, Sidonie had the appearance of a love-sick woman. With what heartrending expression, with the cry of a wounded dove, did she repeat that refrain, so melancholy and so sweet, in the childlike *patois* of the colonies:

"C'est l'amou, l'amou qui tourne la tête à li."

It was enough to drive the unlucky judge mad as well.

But no! The siren had been unfortunate in her choice of a ballad. For, at the mere name of Mam'zelle Zizi, Frantz was suddenly transported to a gloomy chamber in the Marais, a long way from Sidonie's salon, and his compassionate heart evoked the image of little Désirée Delobelle, who had loved him so long. Until she was fifteen, she never had been called anything but Zirée or Zizi, and she was the *pauv' pitit* of the Creole ballad to the life, the ever-neglected, ever-faithful lover. In vain now did the other sing. Frantz no longer heard her or saw her. He was in that poor room, beside the great armchair, on the little low chair on which he had sat so often awaiting the father's return. Yes, there, and there only, was his salvation. He must take refuge in that child's love, throw himself at her feet, say to her, "Take me, save me!" And who

* "Poor little Mam'zelle Zizi,
'Tis love, 'tis love that turns her head."

knows? She loved him so dearly. Perhaps she would save him, would cure him of his guilty passion.

"Where are you going?" asked Risler, seeing that his brother rose hurriedly as soon as the last flourish was at an end.

"I am going back. It is late."

"What? You are not going to sleep here? Why your room is ready for you."

"It is all ready," added Sidonie, with a meaning glance.

He refused resolutely. His presence in Paris was necessary for the fulfilment of certain very important commissions intrusted to him by the Company. They continued their efforts to detain him when he was in the vestibule, when he was crossing the garden in the moonlight and running to the station, amid all the divers noises of Asnières.

When he had gone, Risler went up to his room, leaving Sidonie and Madame Dobson at the windows of the salon. The music from the neighboring Casino reached their ears, with the "Yo-ho!" of the boatmen and the footsteps of the dancers like a rhythmical, muffled drumming on the tambourine.

"There's a kill-joy for you!" observed Madame Dobson.

"Oh, I have checkmated him," replied Sidonie; "only I must be careful. I shall be closely watched now. He is so jealous. I am going to write to Cazaboni not to come again for some time, and you must tell Georges to-morrow morning to go to Savigny for a fortnight."

CHAPTER XV

POOR LITTLE MAM'ZELLE ZIZI

H, how happy Désirée was!

Frantz came every day and sat at her feet on the little low chair, as in the good old days, and he no longer came to talk of Sidonie.

As soon as she began to work in the morning, she would see the door open softly. "Good morning, Mam'zelle Zizi." He always called her now by the name she had borne as a child; and if you could know how prettily he said it: "Good morning, Mam'zelle Zizi."

In the evening they waited for "the father" together, and while she worked he made her shudder with the story of his adventures.

"What is the matter with you? You're not the same as you used to be," Mamma Delobelle would say, surprised to see her in such high spirits and above all so active. For instead of remaining always buried in her easy-chair, with the self-renunciation of a young grandmother, the little creature was continually jumping up and running to the window as lightly as if she were putting out wings; and she practised standing erect, asking her mother in a whisper:

"Do you notice *it* when I am not walking?"

From her graceful little head, upon which she had previously concentrated all her energies in the arrangement of her hair, her coquetry extended over her whole person, as did her fine, waving tresses when she unloosed them. Yes, she was very, very coquettish now; and everybody noticed it. Even the "birds and insects for ornament" assumed a knowing little air.

Ah, yes! Désirée Delobelle was happy. For some days M. Frantz had been talking of their all going into the country together; and as the father, kind and generous as always, graciously consented to allow the ladies to take a day's rest, all four set out one Sunday morning.

Oh! the lovely drive, the lovely country, the lovely river, the lovely trees!

Do not ask her where they went; Désirée never knew. But she will tell you that the sun was brighter there than anywhere else, the birds more joyous, the woods denser; and she will not lie.

The bouquet that the little cripple brought back from that beautiful excursion made her room fragrant for a week. Among the hyacinths, the violets, the white-thorn, was a multitude of nameless little flowers, those flowers of the lowly which grow from nomadic seed scattered everywhere along the roads.

Gazing at the slender, pale blue and bright pink blossoms, with all the delicate shades that flowers invented before colorists, many and many a time during that week Désirée took her excursion again. The violets reminded her of the little moss-covered mound on which she had picked them, seeking them

under the leaves, her fingers touching Frantz's. They had found these great water-lilies on the edge of a ditch, still damp from the winter rains, and, in order to reach them, she had leaned very heavily on Frantz's arm. All these memories occurred to her as she worked. Meanwhile the sun, shining in at the open window, made the feathers of the humming-birds glisten. The springtime, youth, the songs of the birds, the fragrance of the flowers, transfigured that dismal fifth-floor workroom, and Désirée said in all seriousness to Mamma Delobelle, putting her nose to her friend's bouquet:

"Have you noticed how sweet the flowers smell this year, mamma?"

And Frantz, too, began to fall under the charm. Little by little Mam'zelle Zizi took possession of his heart and banished from it even the memory of Sidonie. To be sure, the poor judge did all that he could to accomplish that result. At every hour in the day he was by Désirée's side, and clung to her like a child. Not once did he venture to return to Asnières. He feared the other too much.

"Pray come and see us once in a while; Sidonie keeps asking for you," Risler said to him from time to time, when his brother came to the factory to see him. But Frantz held firm, alleging all sorts of business engagements as pretexts for postponing his visit to the next day. It was easy to satisfy Risler, who was more engrossed than ever with his press, which they had just begun to build.

Whenever Frantz came down from his brother's closet, old Sigismond was sure to be watching for him,

and would walk a few steps with him in his long, lute-string sleeves, quill and knife in hand. He kept the young man informed concerning matters at the factory. For some time past, things seemed to have changed for the better. Monsieur Georges came to his office regularly, and returned to Savigny every night. No more bills were presented at the counting-room. It seemed, too, that Madame over yonder was keeping more within bounds.

The cashier was triumphant.

"You see, my boy, whether I did well to write to you. Your arrival was all that was needed to straighten everything out. And yet," the good man would add by force of habit, "and yet *I haf no gonfidence.*"

"Never fear, Monsieur Sigismond, I am here," the judge would reply.

"You're not going away yet, are you, my dear Frantz?"

"No, no—not yet. I have an important matter to finish up first."

"Ah! so much the better."

The important matter to which Frantz referred was his marriage to Désirée Delobelle. He had not yet mentioned it to any one, not even to her; but Mam'-zelle Zizi must have suspected something, for she became prettier and more light-hearted from day to day, as if she foresaw that the day would soon come when she would need all her gayety and all her beauty.

They were alone in the workroom one Sunday afternoon. Mamma Delobelle had gone out, proud enough to show herself for once in public with her great man,

and leaving friend Frantz with her daughter to keep her company. Carefully dressed, his whole person denoting a holiday air, Frantz had a singular expression on his face that day, an expression at once timid and resolute, emotional and solemn, and simply from the way in which the little low chair took its place beside the great easy-chair, the easy-chair understood that a very serious communication was about to be made to it in confidence, and it had some little suspicion as to what it might be.

The conversation began with divers unimportant remarks, interspersed with long and frequent pauses, just as, on a journey, we stop at every baiting-place to take breath, to enable us to reach our destination.

"It is a fine day to-day."

"Oh! yes, beautiful."

"Our flowers still smell sweet."

"Oh! very sweet."

And even as they uttered those trivial sentences, their voices trembled at the thought of what was about to be said.

At last the little low chair moved a little nearer the great easy-chair; their eyes met, their fingers were intertwined, and the two, in low tones, slowly called each other by their names.

"Désirée!"

"Frantz!"

At that moment there was a knock at the door.

It was the soft little tap of a daintily gloved hand which fears to soil itself by the slightest touch.

"Come in!" said Désirée, with a slight gesture of

impatience; and Sidonie appeared, lovely, coquettish, and affable. She had come to see her little Zizi, to embrace her as she was passing by. She had been meaning to come for so long.

Frantz's presence seemed to surprise her greatly, and, being engrossed by her delight in talking with her former friend, she hardly looked at him. After the effusive greetings and caresses, after a pleasant chat over old times, she expressed a wish to see the window on the landing and the room formerly occupied by the Rislers. It pleased her thus to live all her youth over again.

"Do you remember, Frantz, when the Princess Humming-bird entered your room, holding her little head very straight under a diadem of birds' feathers?"

Frantz did not reply. He was too deeply moved to reply. Something warned him that it was on his account, solely on his account, that the woman had come, that she was determined to see him again, to prevent him from giving himself to another, and the poor wretch realized with dismay that she would not have to exert herself overmuch to accomplish her object. When he saw her enter the room, his whole heart had been caught in her net once more.

Désirée suspected nothing, not she! Sidonie's manner was so frank and friendly. And then, they were brother and sister now. Love was no longer possible between them.

But the little cripple had a vague presentiment of woe when Sidonie, standing in the doorway and ready to go, turned carelessly to her brother-in-law and said:

"By the way, Frantz, Risler told me to be sure to bring you back to dine with us to-night. The carriage is below. We will pick him up as we pass the factory."

Then she added, with the prettiest smile imaginable:

"You will let us have him, won't you, Zirée? Don't be afraid; we will send him back."

And he had the courage to go, the ungrateful wretch!

He went without hesitation, without once turning back, whirled away by his passion as by a raging sea, and neither on that day nor the next nor ever after could Mam'zelle Zizi's great easy-chair learn what the interesting communication was that the little low chair had to make to it.

CHAPTER XVI

THE WAITING-ROOM

ELL, yes, I love you, I love you, more than ever and for ever! What is the use of struggling and fighting against fate? Our sin is stronger than we. But, after all, is it a crime for us to love? We were destined for each other. Have we not the right to come together, although life has parted us? So, come! It is all over; we will go away. Meet me to-morrow evening, Lyon station, at ten o'clock. The tickets are secured and I shall be there awaiting you. FRANTZ."

For a month past Sidonie had been hoping for that letter, a month during which she had brought all her coaxing and cunning into play to lure her brother-in-law on to that written revelation of passion. She had difficulty in accomplishing it. It was no easy matter to pervert an honest young heart like Frantz's to the point of committing a crime; and in that strange contest, in which the one who really loved fought against his own cause, she had often felt that she was at the end of her strength and was almost discouraged. When she was most confident that he was conquered, his sense of right would suddenly rebel, and he would be all ready to flee, to escape her once more.

What a triumph it was for her, therefore, when that

letter was handed to her one morning. Madame Dobson happened to be there. She had just arrived, laden with complaints from Georges, who was horribly bored away from his mistress, and was beginning to be alarmed concerning this brother-in-law, who was more attentive, more jealous, more exacting than a husband.

"Oh! the poor, dear fellow, the poor, dear, fellow," said the sentimental American, "if you could see how unhappy he is!"

And, shaking her curls, she unrolled her music-roll and took from it the poor, dear fellow's letters, which she had carefully hidden between the leaves of her songs, delighted to be involved in this love-story, to give vent to her emotion in an atmosphere of intrigue and mystery which melted her cold eyes and suffused her dry, pale complexion.

Strange to say, while lending her aid most willingly to this constant going and coming of love-letters, the youthful and attractive Dobson had never written or received a single one on her own account.

Always on the road between Asnières and Paris with an amorous message under her wing, that odd carrier-pigeon remained true to her own dovecot and cooed for none but unselfish motives.

When Sidonie showed her Frantz's note, Madame Dobson asked:

"What shall you write in reply?"

"I have already written. I consented."

"What! You will go away with that madman?"

Sidonie laughed scornfully.

"Ha! ha! well, hardly! I consented so that he may

go and wait for me at the station. That is all. The least I can do is to give him a quarter of an hour of agony. He has made me miserable enough for the last month. Just consider that I have changed my whole life for my gentleman! I have had to close my doors and give up seeing my friends and everybody I know who is young and agreeable, beginning with Georges and ending with you. For you know, my dear, you weren't agreeable to him, and he would have liked to dismiss you with the rest."

The one thing that Sidonie did not mention—and it was the deepest cause of her anger against Frantz—was that he had frightened her terribly by threatening to tell her husband her guilty secret. From that moment she had felt decidedly ill at ease, and her life, her dear life, which she so petted and coddled, had seemed to her to be exposed to serious danger. Yes, the thought that her husband might some day be apprized of her conduct positively terrified her.

That blessed letter put an end to all her fears. It was impossible now for Frantz to expose her, even in the frenzy of his disappointment, knowing that she had such a weapon in her hands; and if he did speak, she would show the letter, and all his accusations would become in Risler's eyes calumny pure and simple. Ah, master judge, we have you now!

"I am born again—I am born again!" she cried to Madame Dobson. She ran out into the garden, gathered great bouquets for her salon, threw the windows wide open to the sunlight, gave orders to the cook, the coachman, the gardener. The house must be made to

look beautiful, for Georges was coming back, and for a beginning she organized a grand dinner-party for the end of the week.

The next evening Sidonie, Risler, and Madame Dobson were together in the salon. While honest Risler turned the leaves of an old handbook of mechanics, Sidonie sang to Madame Dobson's accompaniment. Suddenly she stopped in the middle of her aria and burst into a peal of laughter. The clock had just struck ten.

Risler looked up quickly.

"What are you laughing at?"

"Nothing—an idea that came into my head," replied Sidonie, winking at Madame Dobson and pointing at the clock.

It was the hour appointed for the meeting, and she was thinking of her lover's torture as he waited for her to come.

Since the return of the messenger bringing from Sidonie the "yes" he had so feverishly awaited, a great calm had come over his troubled mind, like the sudden removal of a heavy burden. No more uncertainty, no more clashing between passion and duty.

Not once did it occur to him that on the other side of the landing some one was weeping and sighing because of him. Not once did he think of his brother's despair, of the ghastly drama they were to leave behind them. He saw a sweet little pale face resting beside his in the railway train, a blooming lip within reach of his lip, and two fathomless eyes looking at him by the soft light

of the lamp, to the soothing accompaniment of the wheels and the steam.

Two hours before the opening of the gate for the designated train, Frantz was already at the Lyon station, that gloomy station which, in the distant quarter of Paris in which it is situated, seems like a first halting-place in the provinces. He sat down in the darkest corner and remained there without stirring, as if dazed.

Instinctively, although the appointed hour was still distant, he looked among the people who were hurrying along, calling to one another, to see if he could not discern that graceful figure suddenly emerging from the crowd and thrusting it aside at every step with the radiance of her beauty.

After many departures and arrivals and shrill whistles, the station suddenly became empty, as deserted as a church on weekdays. The time for the ten o'clock train was drawing near. There was no other train before that. Frantz rose. In a quarter of an hour, half an hour at the least, she would be there.

Frantz went hither and thither, watching the carriages that arrived. Each new arrival made him start. He fancied that he saw her enter, closely veiled, hesitating, a little embarrassed. How quickly he would be by her side, to comfort her, to protect her!

The hour for the departure of the train was approaching. He looked at the clock. There was but a quarter of an hour more. It alarmed him; but the bell at the wicket, which had now been opened, summoned him. He ran thither and took his place in the long line.

"Two first-class for Marseilles," he said. It seemed to him as if that were equivalent to taking possession.

He made his way back to his post of observation through the luggage-laden wagons and the late-comers who jostled him as they ran. The drivers shouted, "Take care!" He stood there among the wheels of the cabs, under the horses' feet, with deaf ears and staring eyes. Only five minutes more. It was almost impossible for her to arrive in time.

At last she appeared.

Yes, there she is, it is certainly she—a woman in black, slender and graceful, accompanied by another shorter woman—Madame Dobson, no doubt.

But a second glance undeceived him. It was a young woman who resembled her, a woman of fashion like her, with a happy face. A man, also young, joined them. It was evidently a wedding-party; the mother accompanied them, to see them safely on board the train.

Now there is the confusion of departure, the last stroke of the bell, the steam escaping with a hissing sound, mingled with the hurried footsteps of belated passengers, the slamming of doors and the rumbling of the heavy omnibuses. Sidonie comes not. And Frantz still waits.

At that moment a hand is placed on his shoulder.

Great God!

He turns. The coarse face of M. Gardinois, surrounded by a travelling-cap with ear-pieces, is before him.

"I am not mistaken, it is Monsieur Risler. Are you

going to Marseilles by the express? I am not going far."

He explains to Frantz that he has missed the Orléans train, and is going to try to connect with Savigny by the Lyon line; then he talks about Risler Aîné and the factory.

"It seems that business hasn't been prospering for some time. They were caught in the Bonnardel failure. Ah! our young men need to be careful. At the rate they're sailing their ship, the same thing is likely to happen to them that happened to Bonnardel. But excuse me, I believe they're about to close the gate. *Au revoir.*"

Frantz has hardly heard what he has been saying. His brother's ruin, the destruction of the whole world, nothing is of any further consequence to him. He is waiting, waiting.

But now the gate is abruptly closed like a last barrier between him and his persistent hope. Once more the station is empty. The uproar has been transferred to the line of the railway, and suddenly a shrill whistle falls upon the lover's ear like an ironical farewell, then dies away in the darkness.

The ten o'clock train has gone!

He tries to be calm and to reason. Evidently she missed the train from Asnières; but, knowing that he is waiting for her, she will come, no matter how late it may be. He will wait longer. The waiting-room was made for that.

The unhappy man sits down on a bench. The prospect of a long vigil brings to his mind a well-known

room in which at that hour the lamp burns low on a table laden with humming-birds and insects, but that vision passes swiftly through his mind in the chaos of confused thoughts to which the delirium of suspense gives birth.

And while he thus lost himself in thought, the hours passed. The roofs of the buildings of Mazas, buried in darkness, were already beginning to stand out distinctly against the brightening sky. What was he to do? He must go to Asnières at once and try to find out what had happened. He wished he were there already.

Having made up his mind, he descended the steps of the station at a rapid pace, passing soldiers with their knapsacks on their backs, and poor people who rise early coming to take the morning train, the train of poverty and want.

In front of one of the stations he saw a crowd collected, ragpickers and countrywomen. Doubtless some drama of the night about to reach its *dénouement* before the Commissioner of Police. Ah! if Frantz had known what that drama was! but he could have no suspicion, and he glanced at the crowd indifferently from a distance.

When he reached Asnières, after a walk of two or three hours, it was like an awakening. The sun, rising in all its glory, set field and river on fire. The bridge, the houses, the quay, all stood forth with that matutinal sharpness of outline which gives the impression of a new day emerging, luminous and smiling, from the dense mists of the night. From a distance he descried his brother's house, already awake, the open blinds

and the flowers on the window-sills. He wandered about some time before he could summon courage to enter.

Suddenly some one hailed him from the shore:

"Ah! Monsieur Frantz. How early you are to-day!"

It was Sidonie's coachman taking his horses to bathe in the river.

"Has anything happened at the house?" inquired Frantz tremblingly.

"No, Monsieur Frantz."

"Is my brother at home?"

"No, Monsieur slept at the factory."

"No one sick?"

"No, Monsieur Frantz, no one, so far as I know."

Thereupon Frantz made up his mind to ring at the small gate. The gardener was raking the paths. The house was astir; and, early as it was, he heard Sidonie's voice as clear and vibrating as the song of a bird among the rosebushes of the façade.

She was talking with animation. Frantz, deeply moved, drew near to listen.

"No, no cream. The *café parfait* will be enough. Be sure that it's well frozen and ready at seven o'clock. Oh! about an *entrée*—let us see——"

She was holding council with her cook concerning the famous dinner-party for the next day. Her brother-in-law's sudden appearance did not disconcert her.

"Ah! good-morning, Frantz," she said very coolly. "I am at your service directly. We're to have some people to dinner to-morrow, customers of the firm, a

grand business dinner. You'll excuse me, won't you?"

Fresh and smiling, in the white ruffles of her trailing morning-gown and her little lace cap, she continued to discuss her ménu, inhaling the cool air that rose from the fields and the river. There was not the slightest trace of chagrin or anxiety upon that tranquil face, which was a striking contrast to the lover's features, distorted by a night of agony and fatigue.

For a long quarter of an hour Frantz, sitting in a corner of the salon, saw all the conventional dishes of a *bourgeois* dinner pass before him in their regular order, from the little hot *pâtés*, the *sole Normande* and the innumerable ingredients of which that dish is composed, to the Montreuil peaches and Fontainebleau grapes.

At last, when they were alone and he was able to speak, he asked in a hollow voice:

"Didn't you receive my letter?"

"Why, yes, of course."

She had risen to go to the mirror and adjust a little curl or two entangled with her floating ribbons, and continued, looking at herself all the while:

"Yes, I received your letter. Indeed, I was charmed to receive it. Now, should you ever feel inclined to tell your brother any of the vile stories about me that you have threatened me with, I could easily satisfy him that the only source of your lying tale-bearing was anger with me for repulsing a criminal passion as it deserved. Consider yourself warned, my dear boy—and *au revoir*."

As pleased as an actress who has just delivered a telling speech with fine effect, she passed him and left the room smiling, with a little curl at the corners of her mouth, triumphant and without anger.

And he did not kill her!

CHAPTER XVII

AN ITEM OF NEWS

ON the evening preceding that ill-omened day, a few moments after Frantz had stealthily left his room on Rue de Braque, the illustrious Delobelle returned home, with downcast face and that air of lassitude and disillusionment with which he always met untoward events.

"Oh! *mon Dieu*, my poor man, what has happened?" instantly inquired Madame Delobelle, whom twenty years of exaggerated dramatic pantomime had not yet surfeited.

Before replying, the ex-actor, who never failed to precede his most trivial words with some facial play, learned long before for stage purposes, dropped his lower lip, in token of disgust and loathing, as if he had just swallowed something very bitter.

"The matter is that those Rislers are certainly ingrates or egotists, and, beyond all question, exceedingly ill-bred. Do you know what I just learned downstairs from the *concierge*, who glanced at me out of the corner of his eye, making sport of me? Well, Frantz Risler has gone! He left the house a short time ago, and has left Paris perhaps ere this, without so much

as coming to shake my hand, to thank me for the welcome he has received here. What do you think of that? For he didn't say good-by to you two either, did he? And yet, only a month ago, he was always in our rooms, without any remonstrance from us."

Mamma Delobelle uttered an exclamation of genuine surprise and grief. Désirée, on the contrary, did not say a word or make a motion. She was always the same little iceberg.

Oh! wretched mother, turn your eyes upon your daughter. See that transparent pallor, those tearless eyes which gleam unwaveringly, as if their thoughts and their gaze were concentrated on some object visible to them alone. Cause that poor suffering heart to open itself to you. Question your child. Make her speak, above all things make her weep, to rid her of the burden that is stifling her, so that her tear-dimmed eyes can no longer distinguish in space that horrible unknown thing upon which they are fixed in desperation now.

For nearly a month past, ever since the day when Sidonie came and took Frantz away in her coupé, Désirée had known that she was no longer loved, and she knew her rival's name. She bore them no ill-will, she pitied them rather. But, why had he returned? Why had he so heedlessly given her false hopes? How many tears had she devoured in silence since those hours! How many tales of woe had she told her little birds! For once more it was work that had sustained her, desperate, incessant work, which, by its regularity and monotony, by the constant recurrence of the same du-

ties and the same motions, served as a balance-wheel to her thoughts.

Lately Frantz was not altogether lost to her. Although he came but rarely to see her, she knew that he was there, she could hear him go in and out, pace the floor with restless step, and sometimes, through the half-open door, see his loved shadow hurry across the landing. He did not seem happy. Indeed, what happiness could be in store for him? He loved his brother's wife. And at the thought that Frantz was not happy, the fond creature almost forgot her own sorrow to think only of the sorrow of the man she loved.

She was well aware that it was impossible that he could ever love her again. But she thought that perhaps she would see him come in some day, wounded and dying, that he would sit down on the little low chair, lay his head on her knees, and with a great sob tell her of his suffering and say to her, "Comfort me."

That forlorn hope kept her alive for three weeks. She needed so little as that.

But no. Even that was denied her. Frantz had gone, gone without a glance for her, without a parting word. The lover's desertion was followed by the desertion of the friend. It was horrible!

At her father's first words, she felt as if she were hurled into a deep, ice-cold abyss, filled with darkness, into which she plunged swiftly, helplessly, well knowing that she would never return to the light. She was suffocating. She would have liked to resist, to struggle, to call for help.

Who was there who had the power to sustain her in that great disaster?

God? The thing that is called Heaven?

She did not even think of that. In Paris, especially in the quarters where the working class live, the houses are too high, the streets too narrow, the air too murky for heaven to be seen.

It was Death alone at which the little cripple was gazing so earnestly. Her course was determined upon at once: she must die. But how?

Sitting motionless in her easy-chair, she considered what manner of death she should choose. As she was almost never alone, she could not think of the brazier of charcoal, to be lighted after closing the doors and windows. As she never went out she could not think either of poison to be purchased at the druggist's, a little package of white powder to be buried in the depths of the pocket, with the needle-case and the thimble. There was the phosphorus on the matches, too, the verdigris on old sous, the open window with the paved street below; but the thought of forcing upon her parents the ghastly spectacle of a self-inflicted death-agony, the thought that what would remain of her, picked up amid a crowd of people, would be so frightful to look upon, made her reject that method.

She still had the river. At all events, the water carries you away somewhere, so that nobody finds you and your death is shrouded in mystery.

The river! She shuddered at the mere thought. But it was not the vision of the deep, black water that terrified her. The girls of Paris laugh at that. You throw

your apron over your head so that you can't see, and *pouf!* But she must go downstairs, into the street, all alone, and the street frightened her.

Yes, it was a terrible thing to go out into the street alone. She must wait until the gas was out, steal softly downstairs when her mother had gone to bed, pull the cord of the gate, and make her way across Paris, where you meet men who stare impertinently into your face, and pass brilliantly lighted cafés. The river was a long distance away. She would be very tired. However, there was no other way than that.

"I am going to bed, my child; are you going to sit up any longer?"

With her eyes on her work, "my child" replied that she was. She wished to finish her dozen.

"Good-night, then," said Mamma Delobelle, her enfeebled sight being unable to endure the light longer. "I have put father's supper by the fire. Just look at it before you go to bed."

Désirée did not lie. She really intended to finish her dozen, so that her father could take them to the shop in the morning; and really, to see that tranquil little head bending forward in the white light of the lamp, one would never have imagined all the sinister thoughts with which it was thronged.

At last she takes up the last bird of the dozen, a marvellously lovely little bird whose wings seem to have been dipped in sea-water, all green as they are with a tinge of sapphire.

Carefully, daintily, Désirée suspends it on a piece

of brass wire, in the charming attitude of a frightened creature about to fly away.

Ah! how true it is that the little blue bird is about to fly away! What a desperate flight into space! How certain one feels that this time it is the great journey, the everlasting journey from which there is no return!

By and by, very softly, Désirée opens the wardrobe and takes a thin shawl which she throws over her shoulders; then she goes. What? Not a glance at her mother, not a silent farewell, not a tear? No, nothing! With the terrible clearness of vision of those who are about to die, she suddenly realizes that her childhood and youth have been sacrificed to a vast self-love. She feels very sure that a word from their great man will comfort that sleeping mother, with whom she is almost angry for not waking, for allowing her to go without a quiver of her closed eyelids.

When one dies young, even by one's own act, it is never without a rebellious feeling, and poor Désirée bids adieu to life, indignant with destiny.

Now she is in the street. Where is she going? Everything seems deserted already. Désirée walks rapidly, wrapped in her little shawl, head erect, dry-eyed. Not knowing the way, she walks straight ahead.

The dark, narrow streets of the Marais, where gas-jets twinkle at long intervals, cross and recross and wind about, and again and again in her feverish course she goes over the same ground. There is always something between her and the river. And to think that, at that very hour, almost in the same quarter, some one else is wandering through the streets, waiting, watch-

ing, desperate! Ah! if they could but meet. Suppose she should accost that feverish watcher, should ask him to direct her:

"I beg your pardon, Monsieur. How can I get to the Seine?"

He would recognize her at once.

"What! Can it be you, Mam'zelle Zizi? What are you doing out-of-doors at this time of night?"

"I am going to die, Frantz. You have taken away all my pleasure in living."

Thereupon he, deeply moved, would seize her, press her to his heart and carry her away in his arms, saying:

"Oh! no, do not die. I need you to comfort me, to cure all the wounds the other has inflicted on me."

But that is a mere poet's dream, one of the meetings that life can not bring about.

Streets, more streets, then a square and a bridge whose lanterns make another luminous bridge in the black water. Here is the river at last. The mist of that damp, soft autumn evening causes all of this huge Paris, entirely strange to her as it is, to appear to her like an enormous confused mass, which her ignorance of the landmarks magnifies still more. This is the place where she must die.

Poor little Désirée!

She recalls the country excursion which Frantz had organized for her. That breath of nature, which she breathed that day for the first time, falls to her lot again at the moment of her death. "Remember," it seems to say to her; and she replies mentally, "Oh! yes, I remember."

She remembers only too well. When it arrives at the end of the quay, which was bedecked as for a holiday, the furtive little shadow pauses at the steps leading down to the bank.

Almost immediately there are shouts and excitement all along the quay:

"Quick—a boat—grappling-irons!" Boatmen and policemen come running from all sides. A boat puts off from the shore with a lantern in the bow.

The flower-women awake, and, when one of them asks with a yawn what is happening, the woman who keeps the café that crouches at the corner of the bridge answers coolly:

"A woman just jumped into the river."

But no. The river has refused to take that child. It has been moved to pity by so great gentleness and charm. In the light of the lanterns swinging to and fro on the shore, a black group forms and moves away. She is saved! It was a sand-hauler who fished her out. Policemen are carrying her, surrounded by boatmen and lightermen, and in the darkness a hoarse voice is heard saying with a sneer: "That water-hen gave me a lot of trouble. You ought to see how she slipped through my fingers! I believe she wanted to make me lose my reward." Gradually the tumult subsides, the bystanders disperse, and the black group moves away toward a police-station.

Ah! poor girl, you thought that it was an easy matter to have done with life, to disappear abruptly. You did not know that, instead of bearing you away swiftly to the oblivion you sought, the river would drive you back

to all the shame, to all the ignominy of unsuccessful suicide. First of all, the station, the hideous station, with its filthy benches, its floor where the sodden dust seems like mud from the street. There Désirée was doomed to pass the rest of the night.

At last day broke with the shuddering glare so distressing to invalids. Suddenly aroused from her torpor, Désirée sat up in her bed, threw off the blanket in which they had wrapped her, and despite fatigue and fever tried to stand, in order to regain full possession of her faculties and her will. She had but one thought—to escape from all those eyes that were opening on all sides, to leave that frightful place where the breath of sleep was so heavy and its attitudes so distorted.

"I implore you, messieurs," she said, trembling from head to foot, "let me return to mamma."

Hardened as they were to Parisian dramas, even those good people realized that they were face to face with something more worthy of attention, more affecting than usual. But they could not take her back to her mother as yet. She must go before the commissioner first. That was absolutely necessary. They called a cab from compassion for her; but she must go from the station to the cab, and there was a crowd at the door to stare at the little lame girl with the damp hair glued to her temples, and her policeman's blanket which did not prevent her shivering. At headquarters she was conducted up a dark, damp stairway where sinister figures were passing to and fro.

When Désirée entered the room, a man rose from the shadow and came to meet her, holding out his hand.

It was the man of the reward, her hideous rescuer at twenty-five francs.

"Well, little mother," he said, with his cynical laugh, and in a voice that made one think of foggy nights on the water, "how are we since our dive?"

The unhappy girl was burning red with fever and shame; so bewildered that it seemed to her as if the river had left a veil over her eyes, a buzzing in her ears. At last she was ushered into a smaller room, into the presence of a pompous individual, wearing the insignia of the Legion of Honor, Monsieur le Commissaire in person, who was sipping his *café au lait* and reading the *Gazette des Tribunaux.*

"Ah! it's you, is it?" he said in a surly tone and without raising his eyes from his paper, as he dipped a piece of bread in his cup; and the officer who had brought Désirée began at once to read his report:

"At quarter to twelve, on Quai de la Mégisserie, in front of No. 17, the woman Delobelle, twenty-four years old, flower-maker, living with her parents on Rue de Braque, tried to commit suicide by throwing herself into the Seine, and was taken out safe and sound by Sieur Parcheminet, sand-hauler of Rue de la Butte-Chaumont."

Monsieur le Commissaire listened as he ate, with the listless, bored expression of a man whom nothing can surprise; at the end he gazed sternly and with a pompous affectation of virtue at the woman Delobelle, and lectured her in the most approved fashion. It was very wicked, it was cowardly, this thing that she had done. What could have driven her to such an evil act? Why

did she seek to destroy herself? Come, woman Delobelle, answer, why was it?

But the woman Delobelle obstinately declined to answer. It seemed to her that it would put a stigma upon her love to avow it in such a place. "I don't know—I don't know," she whispered, shivering.

Testy and impatient, the commissioner decided that she should be taken back to her parents, but only on one condition: she must promise never to try it again.

"Come, do you promise?"

"Oh! yes, Monsieur."

"You will never try again?"

"Oh! no, indeed I will not, never—never!"

Notwithstanding her protestations, Monsieur le Commissaire de Police shook his head, as if he did not trust her oath.

Now she is outside once more, on the way to her home, to a place of refuge; but her martyrdom was not yet at an end.

In the carriage, the officer who accompanied her was too polite, too affable. She seemed not to understand, shrank from him, withdrew her hand. What torture! But the most terrible moment of all was the arrival in Rue de Braque, where the whole house was in a state of commotion, and the inquisitive curiosity of the neighbors must be endured. Early in the morning the whole quarter had been informed of her disappearance. It was rumored that she had gone away with Frantz Risler. The illustrious Delobelle had gone forth very early, intensely agitated, with his hat awry and rumpled wristbands, a sure indication of extraordinary preoccu-

pation; and the *concierge*, on taking up the provisions, had found the poor mother half mad, running from one room to another, looking for a note from the child, for any clew, however unimportant, that would enable her at least to form some conjecture.

Suddenly a carriage stopped in front of the door. Voices and footsteps echoed through the hall.

"M'ame Delobelle, here she is! Your daughter's been found."

It was really Désirée who came toiling up the stairs on the arm of a stranger, pale and fainting, without hat or shawl, and wrapped in a great brown cape. When she saw her mother she smiled at her with an almost foolish expression.

"Do not be alarmed, it is nothing," she tried to say, then sank to the floor. Mamma Delobelle would never have believed that she was so strong. To lift her daughter, take her into the room, and put her to bed was a matter of a moment; and she talked to her and kissed her.

"Here you are at last. Where have you come from, you bad child? Tell me, is it true that you tried to kill yourself? Were you suffering so terribly? Why did you conceal it from me?"

When she saw her mother in that condition, with tear-stained face, aged in a few short hours, Désirée felt a terrible burden of remorse. She remembered that she had gone away without saying good-by to her, and that in the depths of her heart she had accused her of not loving her.

Not loving her!

"Why, it would kill me if you should die," said the poor mother. "Oh! when I got up this morning and saw that your bed hadn't been slept in and that you weren't in the workroom either!—I just turned round and fell flat. Are you warm now? Do you feel well? You won't do it again, will you—try to kill yourself?"

And she tucked in the bed-clothes, rubbed her feet, and rocked her upon her breast.

As she lay in bed with her eyes closed, Désirée saw anew all the incidents of her suicide, all the hideous scenes through which she had passed in returning from death to life. In the fever, which rapidly increased, in the intense drowsiness which began to overpower her, her mad journey across Paris continued to excite and torment her. Myriads of dark streets stretched away before her, with the Seine at the end of each.

That ghastly river, which she could not find in the night, haunted her now.

She felt that she was besmirched with its slime, its mud; and in the nightmare that oppressed her, the poor child, powerless to escape the obsession of her recollections, whispered to her mother: "Hide me—hide me—I am ashamed!"

CHAPTER XVIII

SHE PROMISED NOT TO TRY AGAIN

H! no, she will not try it again. Monsieur le Commissaire need have no fear. In the first place how could she go as far as the river, now that she can not stir from her bed? If Monsieur le Commissaire could see her now, he would not doubt her word. Doubtless the wish, the longing for death, so unmistakably written on her pale face the other morning, are still visible there; but they are softened, resigned. The woman Delobelle knows that by waiting a little, yes, a very little time, she will have nothing more to wish for.

The doctors declare that she is dying of pneumonia; she must have contracted it in her wet clothes. The doctors are mistaken; it is not pneumonia. Is it her love, then, that is killing her? No. Since that terrible night she no longer thinks of Frantz, she no longer feels that she is worthy to love or to be loved. Thenceforth there is a stain upon her spotless life, and it is of the shame of that and of nothing else that she is dying.

Mamma Delobelle sits by Désirée's bed, working by the light from the window, and nursing her daughter. From time to time she raises her eyes to contemplate

that mute despair, that mysterious disease, then hastily resumes her work; for it is one of the hardest trials of the poor that they can not suffer at their ease.

Mamma Delobelle had to work alone now, and her fingers had not the marvellous dexterity of Désirée's little hands; medicines were dear, and she would not for anything in the world have interfered with one of "the father's" cherished habits. And so, at whatever hour the invalid opened her eyes, she would see her mother, in the pale light of early morning, or under her night lamp, working, working without rest.

Between two stitches the mother would look up at her child, whose face grew paler and paler:

"How do you feel?"

"Very well," the sick girl would reply, with a faint, heart-broken smile, which illumined her sorrowful face and showed all the ravages that had been wrought upon it, as a sunbeam, stealing into a poor man's lodging, instead of brightening it, brings out more clearly its cheerlessness and nudity.

The illustrious Delobelle was never there. He had not changed in any respect the habits of a strolling player out of an engagement. And yet he knew that his daughter was dying: the doctor had told him so. Moreover, it had been a terrible blow to him, for, at heart, he loved his child dearly; but in that singular nature the most sincere and the most genuine feelings adopted a false and unnatural mode of expression, by the same law which ordains that, when a shelf is placed awry, nothing that you place upon it seems to stand straight.

Delobelle's natural tendency was, before everything, to air his grief, to spread it abroad. He played the rôle of the unhappy father from one end of the boulevard to the other. He was always to be found in the neighborhood of the theatres or at the actors' restaurant, with red eyes and pale cheeks. He loved to invite the question, "Well, my poor old fellow, how are things going at home?" Thereupon he would shake his head with a nervous gesture; his grimace held tears in check, his mouth imprecations, and he would stab heaven with a silent glance, overflowing with wrath, as when he played the *Médecin des Enfants;* all of which did not prevent him, however, from bestowing the most delicate and thoughtful attentions upon his daughter.

He also maintained an unalterable confidence in himself, no matter what happened. And yet his eyes came very near being opened to the truth at last. A hot little hand laid upon that pompous, illusion-ridden head came very near expelling the bee that had been buzzing there so long. This is how it came to pass.

One night Désirée awoke with a start, in a very strange state. It should be said that the doctor, when he came to see her on the preceding evening, had been greatly surprised to find her suddenly brighter and calmer, and entirely free from fever. Without attempting to explain this unhoped-for resurrection, he had gone away, saying, "Let us wait and see"; he relied upon the power of youth to throw off disease, upon the resistless force of the life-giving sap, which often engrafts a new life upon the very symptoms of death. If he had looked under Désirée's pillow, he would have

found there a letter postmarked Cairo, wherein lay the secret of that happy change. Four pages signed by Frantz, his whole conduct confessed and explained to his dear little Zizi.

It was the very letter of which the sick girl had dreamed. If she had dictated it herself, all the phrases likely to touch her heart, all the delicately worded excuses likely to pour balm into her wounds, would have been less satisfactorily expressed. Frantz repented, asked forgiveness, and without making any promises, above all without asking anything from her, described to his faithful friend his struggles, his remorse, his sufferings.

What a misfortune that that letter had not arrived a few days earlier. Now, all those kind words were to Désirée like the dainty dishes that are brought too late to a man dying of hunger.

Suddenly she awoke, and, as we said a moment since, in an extraordinary state.

In her head, which seemed to her lighter than usual, there suddenly began a grand procession of thoughts and memories. The most distant periods of her past seemed to approach her. The most trivial incidents of her childhood, scenes that she had not then understood, words heard as in a dream, recurred to her mind.

From her bed she could see her father and mother, one by her side, the other in the workroom, the door of which had been left open. Mamma Delobelle was lying back in her chair in the careless attitude of long-continued fatigue, heeded at last; and all the scars, the ugly sabre cuts with which age and suffering brand the

faces of the old, manifested themselves, ineffaceable and pitiful to see, in the relaxation of slumber. Désirée would have liked to be strong enough to rise and kiss that lovely, placid brow, furrowed by wrinkles which did not mar its beauty.

In striking contrast to that picture, the illustrious Delobelle appeared to his daughter through the open door in one of his favorite attitudes. Seated before the little white cloth that bore his supper, with his body at an angle of sixty-seven and a half degrees, he was eating and at the same time running through a pamphlet which rested against the carafe in front of him.

For the first time in her life Désirée noticed the striking lack of harmony between her emaciated mother, scantily clad in little black dresses which made her look even thinner and more haggard than she really was, and her happy, well-fed, idle, placid, thoughtless father. At a glance she realized the difference between the two lives. What would become of them when she was no longer there? Either her mother would work too hard and would kill herself; or else the poor woman would be obliged to cease working altogether, and that selfish husband, forever engrossed by his theatrical ambition, would allow them both to drift gradually into abject poverty, that black hole which widens and deepens as one goes down into it.

Suppose that, before going away—something told her that she would go very soon—before going away, she should tear away the thick bandage that the poor man kept over his eyes wilfully and by force?

Only a hand as light and loving as hers could attempt

that operation. Only she had the right to say to her father:

"Earn your living. Give up the stage."

Thereupon, as time was flying, Désirée Delobelle summoned all her courage and called softly:

"Papa—papa——"

At his daughter's first summons the great man hurried to her side. He entered Désirée's bedroom, radiant and superb, very erect, his lamp in his hand and a camellia in his buttonhole.

"Good evening, Zizi. Aren't you asleep?"

His voice had a joyous intonation that produced a strange effect amid the prevailing gloom. Désirée motioned to him not to speak, pointing to her sleeping mother.

"Put down your lamp—I have something to say to you."

Her voice, broken by emotion, impressed him; and so did her eyes, for they seemed larger than usual, and were lighted by a piercing glance that he had never seen in them.

He approached with something like awe.

"Why, what's the matter, Bichette? Do you feel any worse?"

Désirée replied with a movement of her little pale face that she felt very ill and that she wanted to speak to him very close, very close. When the great man stood by her pillow, she laid her burning hand on the great man's arm and whispered in his ear. She was very ill, hopelessly ill. She realized fully that she had not long to live.

"Then, father, you will be left alone with mamma. Don't tremble like that. You knew that this thing must come, yes, that it was very near. But I want to tell you this. When I am gone, I am terribly afraid mamma won't be strong enough to support the family. Just see how pale and exhausted she is."

The actor looked at his "sainted wife," and seemed greatly surprised to find that she did really look so badly. Then he consoled himself with the selfish remark:

"She never was very strong."

That remark and the tone in which it was made angered Désirée and strengthened her determination. She continued, without pity for the actor's illusions:

"What will become of you two when I am no longer here? Oh! I know that you have great hopes, but it takes them a long while to come to anything. The results you have waited for so long may not arrive for a long time to come; and until then what will you do? Listen! my dear father, I would not willingly hurt you; but it seems to me that at your age, as intelligent as you are, it would be easy for you—I am sure Monsieur Risler Aîné would ask nothing better."

She spoke slowly, with an effort, carefully choosing her words, leaving long pauses between every two sentences, hoping always that they might be filled by a movement, an exclamation from her father. But the actor did not understand.

"I think that you would do well," pursued Désirée, timidly, "I think that you would do well to give up——"

"Eh?—what?—what's that?"

She paused when she saw the effect of her words. The old actor's mobile features were suddenly contracted under the lash of violent despair; and tears, genuine tears which he did not even think of concealing behind his hand as they do on the stage, filled his eyes but did not flow, so tightly did his agony clutch him by the throat. The poor devil began to understand.

She murmured twice or thrice:

"To give up—to give up——"

Then her little head fell back upon the pillow, and she died without having dared to tell him what he would do well to give up.

CHAPTER XIX

APPROACHING CLOUDS

ONE night, near the end of January, old Sigismond Planus, cashier of the house of Fromont Jeune and Risler Aîné, was awakened with a start in his little house at Montrouge by the same teasing voice, the same rattling of chains, followed by that fatal cry:

"The notes!"

"That is true," thought the worthy man, sitting up in bed; "day after to-morrow will be the last day of the month. And I have the courage to sleep!"

In truth, a considerable sum of money must be raised: a hundred thousand francs to be paid on two obligations, and at a moment when, for the first time in thirty years, the strong-box of the house of Fromont was absolutely empty. What was to be done? Sigismond had tried several times to speak to Fromont Jeune, but he seemed to shun the burdensome responsibility of business, and when he walked through the offices was always in a hurry, feverishly excited, and seemed neither to see nor hear anything about him. He answered the old cashier's anxious questions, gnawing his moustache:

"All right, all right, my old Planus. Don't disturb yourself; I will look into it." And as he said it, he seemed to be thinking of something else, to be a thousand leagues away from his surroundings. It was rumored in the factory, where his *liaison* with Madame Risler was no longer a secret to anybody, that Sidonie deceived him, made him very unhappy; and, indeed, his mistress's whims worried him much more than his cashier's anxiety. As for Risler, no one ever saw him; he passed his days shut up in a room under the roof, overseeing the mysterious, interminable manufacture of his machines.

This indifference on the part of the employers to the affairs of the factory, this absolute lack of oversight, had led by slow degrees to general demoralization. Some business was still done, because an established house will go on alone for years by force of the first impetus; but what ruin, what chaos beneath that apparent prosperity?

Sigismond knew it better than any one, and as if to see his way more clearly amid the multitude of painful thoughts which whirled madly through his brain, the cashier lighted his candle, sat down on his bed, and thought, "Where were they to find that hundred thousand francs?"

"Take the notes back. I have no funds to meet them."

No, no! That was not possible. Any sort of humiliation was preferable to that.

"Well, it's decided. I will go to-morrow," sighed the poor cashier.

And he tossed about in torture, unable to close an eye until morning.

Notwithstanding the late hour, Georges Fromont had not yet retired. He was sitting by the fire, with his head in his hands, in the blind and dumb concentration due to irreparable misfortune, thinking of Sidonie, of that terrible Sidonie who was asleep at that moment on the floor above. She was positively driving him mad. She was false to him, he was sure of it, —she was false to him with the Toulousan tenor, that Cazabon, *alias* Cazaboni, whom Madame Dobson had brought to the house. For a long time he had implored her not to receive that man; but Sidonie would not listen to him, and on that very day, speaking of a grand ball she was about to give, she had declared explicitly that nothing should prevent her inviting her tenor.

"Then he's your lover!" Georges had exclaimed angrily, his eyes gazing into hers.

She had not denied it; she had not even turned her eyes away.

And to think that he had sacrificed everything to that woman—his fortune, his honor, even his lovely Claire, who lay sleeping with her child in the adjoining room—a whole lifetime of happiness within reach of his hand, which he had spurned for that vile creature! Now she had admitted that she did not love him, that she loved another. And he, the coward, still longed for her. In heaven's name, what potion had she given him?

Carried away by indignation that made the blood boil in his veins, Georges Fromont started from his armchair and strode feverishly up and down the room, his footsteps echoing in the silence of the sleeping house like living insomnia. The other was asleep upstairs. She could sleep by favor of her heedless, remorseless nature. Perhaps, too, she was thinking of her Cazaboni.

When that thought passed through his mind, Georges had a mad longing to go up, to wake Risler, to tell him everything and destroy himself with her. Really that deluded husband was too idiotic! Why did he not watch her more closely? She was pretty enough, yes, and vicious enough, too, for every precaution to be taken with her.

And it was while he was struggling amid such cruel and unfruitful reflections as these that the devil of anxiety whispered in his ear:

"The notes! the notes!"

The miserable wretch! In his wrath he had entirely forgotten them. And yet he had long watched the approach of that terrible last day of January. How many times, beween two assignations, when his mind, free for a moment from thoughts of Sidonie, recurred to his business, to the realities of life—how many times had he said to himself, "That day will be the end of everything!" But, as with all those who live in the delirium of intoxication, his cowardice convinced him that it was too late to mend matters, and he returned more quickly and more determinedly to his evil courses, in order to forget, to divert his thoughts.

But that was no longer possible. He saw the impending disaster clearly, in its full meaning; and Sigismond Planus's wrinkled, solemn face rose before him with its sharply cut features, whose absence of expression softened their harshness, and his light German-Swiss eyes, which had haunted him for many weeks with their impassive stare.

Well, no, he had not the hundred thousand francs, nor did he know where to get them.

The crisis which, a few hours before, seemed to him a chaos, an eddying whirl in which he could see nothing distinctly and whose very confusion was a source of hope, appeared to him at that moment with appalling distinctness. An empty cash-box, closed doors, notes protested, ruin, are the phantoms he saw whichever way he turned. And when, on top of all the rest, came the thought of Sidonie's treachery, the wretched, desperate man, finding nothing to cling to in that shipwreck, suddenly uttered a sob, a cry of agony, as if appealing for help to some higher power.

"Georges, Georges, it is I. What is the matter?"

His wife stood before him, his wife who now waited for him every night, watching anxiously for his return from the club, for she still believed that he passed his evenings there. That night she had heard him walking very late in his room. At last her child fell asleep, and Claire, hearing the father sob, ran to him.

Oh! what boundless, though tardy remorse overwhelmed him when he saw her before him, so deeply moved, so lovely and so loving! Yes, she was in very truth the true companion, the faithful friend. How

could he have deserted her? For a long, long time he wept upon her shoulder, unable to speak. And it was fortunate that he did not speak, for he would have told her all, all. The unhappy man felt the need of pouring out his heart—an irresistible longing to accuse himself, to ask forgiveness, to lessen the weight of the remorse that was crushing him.

She spared him the pain of uttering a word:

"You have been gambling, have you not? You have lost—lost heavily?"

He moved his head affirmatively; then, when he was able to speak, he confessed that he must have a hundred thousand francs for the day after the morrow, and that he did not know how to obtain them.

She did not reproach him. She was one of those women who, when face to face with disaster, think only of repairing it, without a word of recrimination. Indeed, in the bottom of her heart she blessed this misfortune which brought him nearer to her and became a bond between their two lives, which had long lain so far apart. She reflected a moment. Then, with an effort indicating a resolution which had cost a bitter struggle, she said:

"Not all is lost as yet. I will go to Savigny to-morrow and ask my grandfather for the money."

He would never have dared to suggest that to her. Indeed, it would never have occurred to him. She was so proud and old Gardinois so hard! Surely that was a great sacrifice for her to make for him, and a striking proof of her love.

"Claire, Claire—how good your are!" he said.

Without replying, she led him to their child's cradle.

"Kiss her," she said softly; and as they stood there side by side, their heads leaning over the child, Georges was afraid of waking her, and he embraced the mother passionately.

CHAPTER XX

REVELATIONS

H! here's Sigismond. How goes the world, Père Sigismond? How is business? Is it good with you?"

The old cashier smiled affably, shook hands with the master, his wife, and his brother, and, as they talked, looked curiously about. They were in a manufactory of wall-papers on Faubourg Saint-Antoine, the establishment of the little Prochassons, who were beginning to be formidable rivals. Those former employés of the house of Fromont had set up on their own account, beginning in a very small way, and had gradually succeeded in making for themselves a place on 'Change. Fromont the uncle had assisted them for a long while with his credit and his money; the result being most friendly relations between the two firms, and a balance—between ten or fifteen thousand francs—which had never been definitely adjusted, because they knew that money was in good hands when the Prochassons had it.

Indeed, the appearance of the factory was most reassuring. The chimneys proudly shook their plumes of smoke. The dull roar of constant toil indicated that

the workshops were full of workmen and activity. The buildings were in good repair, the windows clean; everything had an aspect of enthusiasm, of good-humor, of discipline; and behind the grating in the counting-room sat the wife of one of the brothers, simply dressed, with her hair neatly arranged, and an air of authority on her youthful face, deeply intent upon a long column of figures.

Old Sigismond thought bitterly of the difference between the house of Fromont, once so wealthy, now living entirely upon its former reputation, and the ever-increasing prosperity of the establishment before his eyes. His stealthy glance penetrated to the darkest corners, seeking some defect, something to criticise; and his failure to find anything made his heart heavy and his smile forced and anxious.

What embarrassed him most of all was the question how he should approach the subject of the money due his employers without betraying the emptiness of the strong-box. The poor man assumed a jaunty, unconcerned air which was truly pitiful to see. Business was good—very good. He happened to be passing through the quarter and thought he would come in a moment —that was natural, was it not? One likes to see old friends.

But these preambles, these constantly expanding circumlocutions, did not bring him to the point he wished to reach; on the contrary, they led him away from his goal, and imagining that he detected surprise in the eyes of his auditors, he went completely astray, stammered, lost his head, and, as a last resort, took his

hat and pretended to go. At the door he suddenly bethought himself:

"Ah! by the way, so long as I am here——"

He gave a little wink which he thought sly, but which was in reality heartrending.

"So long as I am here, suppose we settle that old account."

The two brothers and the young woman in the counting-room gazed at one another a second, unable to understand.

"Account? What account, pray?"

Then all three began to laugh at the same moment, and heartily too, as if at a joke, a rather broad joke, on the part of the old cashier. "Go along with you, you sly old Père Planus!" The old man laughed with them! He laughed without any desire to laugh, simply to do as the others did.

At last they explained. Fromont Jeune had come in person, six months before, to collect the balance in their hands.

Sigismond felt that his strength was going. But he summoned courage to say:

"Ah! yes; true. I had forgotten. Sigismond Planus is growing old, that is plain. I am failing, my children, I am failing."

And the old man went away wiping his eyes, in which still glistened great tears caused by the hearty laugh he had just enjoyed. The young people behind him exchanged glances and shook their heads. They understood.

The blow he had received was so crushing that the

cashier, as soon as he was out-of-doors, was obliged to sit down on a bench. So that was the reason why Georges did not come to the counting-room for money. He made his collections in person. What had taken place at the Prochassons' had probably been repeated everywhere else. It was quite useless, therefore, for him to subject himself to further humiliation. Yes, but the notes, the notes!—that thought renewed his strength. He wiped the perspiration from his forehead and started once more to try his luck with a customer in the faubourg. But this time he took his precautions and called to the cashier from the doorway, without entering:

"Good-morning, Père So-and-So. I want to ask you a question."

He held the door half open, his hand upon the knob.

"When did we settle our last bill? I forgot to enter it."

Oh! it was a long while ago, a very long while, that their last bill was settled. Fromont Jeune's receipt was dated in September. It was five months ago.

The door was hastily closed. Another! Evidently it would be the same thing everywhere.

"Ah! Monsieur Chorche, Monsieur Chorche," muttered poor Sigismond; and while he pursued his journey, with bowed head and trembling legs, Madame Fromont Jeune's carriage passed him close, on its way to the Orléans station; but Claire did not see old Planus, any more than she had seen, when she left her house a few moments earlier, Monsieur Chèbe in his long frock-coat and the illustrious Delobelle in his

stovepipe hat, turning into the Rue des Vieilles-Haudriettes at opposite ends, each with the factory and Risler's wallet for his objective point. The young woman was much too deeply engrossed by what she had before her to look into the street.

Think of it! It was horrible. To go and ask M. Gardinois for a hundred thousand francs—M. Gardinois, a man who boasted that he had never borrowed or loaned a sou in his life, who never lost an opportunity to tell how, on one occasion, being driven to ask his father for forty francs to buy a pair of trousers, he had repaid the loan in small amounts. In his dealings with everybody, even with his children, M. Gardinois followed those traditions of avarice which the earth, the cruel earth, often ungrateful to those who till it, seems to inculcate in all peasants. The old man did not intend that any part of his colossal fortune should go to his children during his lifetime.

"They'll find my property when I am dead," he often said.

Acting upon that principle, he had married off his daughter, the elder Madame Fromont, without one sou of dowry, and he never forgave his son-in-law for having made a fortune without assistance from him. For it was one of the peculiarities of that nature, made up of vanity and selfishness in equal parts, to wish that every one he knew should need his help, should bow before his wealth. When the Fromonts expressed in his presence their satisfaction at the prosperous turn their business was beginning to take, his sharp, cunning, little blue eye would smile ironically, and he

would growl, "We shall see what it all comes to in the end," in a tone that made them tremble. Sometimes, too, at Savigny, in the evening, when the park, the avenues, the blue slates of the château, the red brick of the stables, the ponds and brooks shone resplendent, bathed in the golden glory of a lovely sunset, this eccentric *parvenu* would say aloud before his children, after looking about him:

"The one thing that consoles me for dying some day is that no one in the family will ever be rich enough to keep a château that costs fifty thousand francs a year to maintain."

And yet, with that latter-day tenderness which even the sternest grandfathers find in the depths of their hearts, old Gardinois would gladly have made a pet of his granddaughter. But Claire, even as a child, had felt an invincible repugnance for the former peasant's hardness of heart and vainglorious selfishness. And when affection forms no bonds between those who are separated by difference in education, such repugnance is increased by innumerable trifles. When Claire married Georges, the grandfather said to Madame Fromont:

"If your daughter wishes, I will give her a royal present; but she must ask for it."

But Claire received nothing, because she would not ask for anything.

What a bitter humiliation to come, three years later, to beg a hundred thousand francs from the generosity she had formerly spurned, to humble herself, to face the endless sermons, the sneering raillery, the whole

seasoned with Berrichon jests, with phrases smacking of the soil, with the taunts, often well-deserved, which narrow, but logical, minds can utter on occasion, and which sting with their vulgar *patois* like an insult from an inferior!

Poor Claire! Her husband and her father were about to be humiliated in her person. She must necessarily confess the failure of the one, the downfall of the house which the other had founded and of which he had been so proud while he lived. The thought that she would be called upon to defend all that she loved best in the world made her strong and weak at the same time.

It was eleven o'clock when she reached Savigny. As she had given no warning of her visit, the carriage from the château was not at the station, and she had no choice but to walk.

It was a cold morning and the roads were dry and hard. The north wind blew freely across the arid fields and the river, and swept unopposed through the leafless trees and bushes. The château appeared under the low-hanging clouds, with its long line of low walls and hedges separating it from the surrounding fields. The slates on the roof were as dark as the sky they reflected; and that magnificent summer residence, completely transformed by the bitter, silent winter, without a leaf on its trees or a pigeon on its roofs, showed no life save in its rippling brooks and the murmuring of the tall poplars as they bowed majestically to one another, shaking the magpies' nests hidden among their highest branches.

At a distance Claire fancied that the home of her

youth wore a surly, depressed air. It seemed to her that Savigny watched her approach with the cold, aristocratic expression which it assumed for passengers on the highroad, who stopped at the iron bars of its gateways.

Oh! the cruel aspect of everything!

And yet not so cruel after all. For, with its tightly closed exterior, Savigny seemed to say to her, "Begone—do not come in!" And if she had chosen to listen, Claire, renouncing her plan of speaking to her grandfather, would have returned at once to Paris to maintain the repose of her life. But she did not understand, poor child! and already the great Newfoundland dog, who had recognized her, came leaping through the dead leaves and sniffed at the gate.

"Good-morning, Françoise. Where is grandpapa?" the young woman asked the gardener's wife, who came to open the gate, fawning and false and trembling, like all the servants at the château when they felt that the master's eye was upon them.

Grandpapa was in his office, a little building independent of the main house, where he passed his days fumbling among boxes and pigeonholes and great books with green backs, with the rage for bureaucracy due to his early ignorance and the strong impression made upon him long before by the office of the notary in his village.

At that moment he was closeted there with his keeper, a sort of country spy, a paid informer who apprised him as to all that was said and done in the neighborhood.

He was the master's favorite. His name was Foui-

nat (polecat), and he had the flat, crafty, blood-thirsty face appropriate to his name.

When Claire entered, pale and trembling under her furs, the old man understood that something serious and unusual had happened, and he made a sign to Fouinat, who disappeared, gliding through the half-open door as if he were entering the very wall.

"What's the matter, little one? Why, you're all *perlutée*," said the grandfather, seated behind his huge desk.

Perluté, in the Berrichon dictionary, signifies troubled, excited, upset, and applied perfectly to Claire's condition. Her rapid walk in the cold country air, the effort she had made in order to do what she was doing, imparted an unwonted expression to her face, which was much less reserved than usual. Without the slightest encouragement on his part, she kissed him and seated herself in front of the fire, where old stumps, surrounded by dry moss and pine needles picked up in the paths, were smouldering with occasional outbursts of life and the hissing of sap. She did not even take time to shake off the frost that stood in beads on her veil, but began to speak at once, faithful to her resolution to state the object of her visit immediately upon entering the room, before she allowed herself to be intimidated by the atmosphere of fear and respect which encompassed the grandfather and made of him a sort of awe-inspiring deity.

She required all her courage not to become confused, not to interrupt her narrative before that piercing gaze which transfixed her, enlivened from her first words by

a malicious joy, before that savage mouth whose corners seemed tightly closed by premeditated reticence, obstinacy, a denial of any sort of sensibility. She went on to the end in one speech, respectful without humility, concealing her emotion, steadying her voice by the consciousness of the truth of her story. Really, seeing them thus face to face, he cold and calm, stretched out in his armchair, with his hands in the pockets of his gray swansdown waistcoat, she carefully choosing her words, as if each of them might condemn or absolve her, you would never have said that it was a child before her grandfather, but an accused person before an examining magistrate.

His thoughts were entirely engrossed by the joy, the pride of his triumph. So they were conquered at last, those proud upstarts of Fromonts! So they needed old Gardinois at last, did they? Vanity, his dominating passion, overflowed in his whole manner, do what he would. When she had finished, he took the floor in his turn, began naturally enough with "I was sure of it—I always said so—I knew we should see what it would all come to"—and continued in the same vulgar, insulting tone, ending with the declaration that, in view of his principles, which were well known in the family, he would not lend a sou.

Then Claire spoke of her child, of her husband's name, which was also her father's, and which would be dishonored by the failure. The old man was as cold, as implacable as ever, and took advantage of her humiliation to humiliate her still more; for he belonged to the race of worthy rustics who, when their enemy is

down, never leave him without leaving on his face the marks of the nails in their sabots.

"All I can say to you, little one, is that Savigny is open to you. Let your husband come here. I happen to need a secretary. Very well, Georges can do my writing for twelve hundred francs a year and board for the whole family. Offer him that from me, and come."

She rose indignantly. She had come as his child and he had received her as a beggar. They had not reached that point yet, thank God!

"Do you think so?" queried M. Gardinois, with a savage light in his eye.

Claire shuddered and walked toward the door without replying. The old man detained her with a gesture.

"Take care! you don't know what you're refusing. It is in your interest, you understand, that I suggest bringing your husband here. You don't know the life he is leading up yonder. Of course you don't know it, or you'd never come and ask me for money to go where yours has gone. Ah! I know all about your man's affairs. I have my police at Paris, yes, and at Asnières, as well as at Savigny. I know what the fellow does with his days and his nights; and I don't choose that my crowns shall go to the places where he goes. They're not clean enough for money honestly earned."

Claire's eyes opened wide in amazement and horror, for she felt that a terrible drama had entered her life at that moment through the little low door of denunciation. The old man continued with a sneer:

"That little Sidonie has fine, sharp teeth."

"Sidonie!"

"Faith, yes, to be sure. I have told you the name. At all events, you'd have found it out some day or other. In fact, it's an astonishing thing that, since the time— But you women are so vain! The idea that a man can deceive you is the last idea to come into your head. Well, yes, Sidonie's the one who has got it all out of him—with her husband's consent, by the way."

He went on pitilessly to tell the young wife the source of the money for the house at Asnières, the horses, the carriages, and how the pretty little nest in the Avenue Gabriel had been furnished. He explained everything in detail. It was clear that, having found a new opportunity to exercise his mania for espionage, he had availed himself of it to the utmost; perhaps, too, there was at the bottom of it all a vague, carefully concealed rage against his little Chèbe, the anger of a senile passion never declared.

Claire listened to him without speaking, with a smile of incredulity. That smile irritated the old man, spurred on his malice. "Ah! you don't believe me. Ah! you want proofs, do you?" And he gave her proofs, heaped them upon her, overpowered her with knife-thrusts in the heart. She had only to go to Darches, the jeweller in the Rue de la Paix. A fortnight before, Georges had bought a diamond necklace there for thirty thousand francs. It was his New Year's gift to Sidonie. Thirty thousand francs for diamonds at the moment of becoming bankrupt!

He might have talked the entire day and Claire would not have interrupted him. She felt that the slightest effort would cause the tears that filled her eyes to over-

flow, and she was determined to smile to the end, the sweet, brave woman. From time to time she cast a sidelong glance at the road. She was in haste to go, to fly from the sound of that spiteful voice, which pursued her pitilessly.

At last he ceased; he had told the whole story. She bowed and walked toward the door.

"Are you going? What a hurry you're in!" said the grandfather, following her outside.

At heart he was a little ashamed of his savagery.

"Won't you breakfast with me?"

She shook her head, not having strength to speak.

"At least wait till the carriage is ready—some one will drive you to the station."

No, still no.

And she walked on, with the old man close behind her. Proudly, and with head erect, she crossed the courtyard, filled with souvenirs of her childhood, without once looking behind. And yet what echoes of hearty laughter, what sunbeams of her younger days were imprinted in the tiniest grain of gravel in that courtyard!

Her favorite tree, her favorite bench, were still in the same place. She had not a glance for them, nor for the pheasants in the aviary, nor even for the great dog Kiss, who followed her docilely, awaiting the caress which she did not give him. She had come as a child of the house, she went away as a stranger, her mind filled with horrible thoughts which the slightest reminder of her peaceful and happy past could not have failed to aggravate.

"Good-by, grandfather."

"Good-by, then."

And the gate closed upon her harshly. As soon as she was alone, she began to walk swiftly, swiftly, almost to run. She was not merely going away, she was escaping. Suddenly, when she reached the end of the wall of the estate, she found herself in front of the little green gate, surrounded by nasturtiums and honeysuckle, where the château mail-box was. She stopped instinctively, struck by one of those sudden awakenings of the memory which take place within us at critical moments and place before our eyes with wonderful clearness of outline the most trivial acts of our lives bearing any relation to present disasters or joys. Was it the red sun that suddenly broke forth from the clouds, flooding the level expanse with its oblique rays in that winter afternoon as at the sunset hour in August? Was it the silence that surrounded her, broken only by the harmonious sounds of nature, which are almost alike at all seasons?

Whatever the cause she saw herself once more as she was, at that same spot, three years before, on a certain day when she placed in the post a letter inviting Sidonie to come and pass a month with her in the country. Something told her that all her misfortunes dated from that moment. "Ah! had I known—had I only known!" And she fancied that she could still feel between her fingers the smooth envelope, ready to drop into the box.

Thereupon, as she reflected what an innocent, hopeful, happy child she was at that moment, she cried out

indignantly, gentle creature that she was, against the injustice of life. She asked herself: "Why is it? What have I done?"

Then she suddenly exclaimed: "No! it isn't true. It can not be possible. Grandfather lied to me." And as she went on toward the station, the unhappy girl tried to convince herself, to make herself believe what she said. But she did not succeed.

The truth dimly seen is like the veiled sun, which tires the eyes far more than its most brilliant rays. In the semi-obscurity which still enveloped her misfortune, the poor woman's sight was keener than she could have wished. Now she understood and accounted for certain peculiar circumstances in her husband's life, his frequent absences, his restlessness, his embarrassed behavior on certain days, and the abundant details which he sometimes volunteered, upon returning home, concerning his movements, mentioning names as proofs which she did not ask. From all these conjectures the evidence of his sin was made up. And still she refused to believe it, and looked forward to her arrival in Paris to set her doubts at rest.

No one was at the station, a lonely, cheerless little place, where no traveller ever showed his face in winter. As Claire sat there awaiting the train, gazing vaguely at the station-master's melancholy little garden, and the débris of climbing plants running along the fences by the track, she felt a moist, warm breath on her glove. It was her friend Kiss, who had followed her and was reminding her of their happy romps together in the old days, with little shakes of the head, short leaps, capers

of joy tempered by humility, concluding by stretching his beautiful white coat at full length at his mistress's feet, on the cold floor of the waiting-room. Those humble caresses which sought her out, like a hesitating offer of devotion and sympathy, caused the sobs she had so long restrained to break forth as last. But suddenly she felt ashamed of her weakness. She rose and sent the dog away, sent him away pitilessly with voice and gesture, pointing to the house in the distance, with a stern face which poor Kiss had never seen. Then she hastily wiped her eyes and her moist hands; for the train for Paris was approaching and she knew that in a moment she should need all her courage.

Claire's first thought on leaving the train was to take a cab and drive to the jeweller in the Rue de la Paix, who had, as her grandfather alleged, supplied Georges with a diamond necklace. If that should prove to be true, then all the rest was true. Her dread of learning the truth was so great that, when she reached her destination and alighted in front of that magnificent establishment, she stopped, afraid to enter. To give herself countenance, she pretended to be deeply interested in the jewels displayed in velvet cases; and one who had seen her, quietly but fashionably dressed, leaning forward to look at that gleaming and attractive display, would have taken her for a happy wife engaged in selecting a bracelet, rather than an anxious, sorrow-stricken soul who had come thither to discover the secret of her life.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon. At that time of day, in winter, the Rue de la Paix presents a truly

dazzling aspect. In that luxurious neighborhood, life moves quickly between the short morning and the early evening. There are carriages moving swiftly in all directions, a ceaseless rumbling, and on the sidewalks a coquettish haste, a rustling of silks and furs. Winter is the real Parisian season. To see that devil's own Paris in all its beauty and wealth and happiness one must watch the current of its life beneath a lowering sky, heavy with snow. Nature is absent from the picture, so to speak. No wind, no sunlight. Just enough light for the dullest colors, the faintest reflections to produce an admirable effect, from the reddish-gray tone of the monuments to the gleams of jet which bespangle a woman's dress. Theatre and concert posters shine resplendent, as if illumined by the effulgence of the footlights. The shops are crowded. It seems that all those people must be preparing for perpetual festivities. And at such times, if any sorrow is mingled with that bustle and tumult, it seems the more terrible for that reason. For five minutes Claire suffered martyrdom worse than death. Yonder, on the road to Savigny, in the vast expanse of the deserted fields, her despair spread out as it were in the sharp air and seemed to enfold her less closely. Here she was stifling. The voices beside her, the footsteps, the heedless jostling of people who passed, all added to her torture.

At last she entered the shop.

"Ah! yes, Madame, certainly—Monsieur Fromont. A necklace of diamonds and roses. We could make you one like it for twenty-five thousand francs."

That was five thousand less than for him.

"Thanks, Monsieur," said Claire, "I will think it over."

A mirror in front of her, in which she saw her dark-ringed eyes and her deathly pallor, frightened her. She went out quickly, walking stiffly in order not to fall.

She had but one idea, to escape from the street, from the noise; to be alone, quite alone, so that she might plunge headlong into that abyss of heartrending thoughts, of black things dancing madly in the depths of her mind. Oh! the coward, the infamous villain! And to think that only last night she was speaking comforting words to him, with her arms about him!

Suddenly, with no knowledge of how it happened, she found herself in the courtyard of the factory. Through what streets had she come? Had she come in a carriage or on foot? She had no remembrance. She had acted unconsciously, as in a dream. The sentiment of reality returned, pitiless and poignant, when she reached the steps of her little house. Risler was there, superintending several men who were carrying potted plants up to his wife's apartments, in preparation for the magnificent party she was to give that very evening. With his usual tranquillity he directed the work, protected the tall branches which the workmen might have broken: "Not like that. Bend it over. Take care of the carpet."

The atmosphere of pleasure and merry-making which had so revolted her a moment before pursued her to her own house. It was too much, after all the rest! She rebelled; and as Risler saluted her, affectionately and with deep respect as always, her face

assumed an expression of intense disgust, and she passed without speaking to him, without seeing the amazement that opened his great, honest eyes.

From that moment her course was determined. Wrath, a wrath born of uprightness and sense of justice, guided her actions. She barely took time to kiss her child's rosy cheeks before running to her mother's room.

"Come, mamma, dress yourself quickly. We are going away. We are going away."

The old lady rose slowly from the armchair in which she was sitting, busily engaged in cleaning her watch-chain by inserting a pin between every two links with infinite care.

"Come, come, hurry. Get your things ready."

Her voice trembled, and the poor monomaniac's room seemed a horrible place to her, all glistening as it was with the cleanliness that had gradually become a mania. She had reached one of those fateful moments when the loss of one illusion causes you to lose them all, enables you to look to the very depths of human misery. The realization of her complete isolation, between her half-mad mother, her faithless husband, her too young child, came upon her for the first time; but it served only to strengthen her in her resolution.

In a moment the whole household was busily engaged in making preparations for this abrupt, unexpected departure. Claire hurried the bewildered servants, and dressed her mother and the child, who laughed merrily amid all the excitement. She was in haste to go before Georges' return, so that he might

find the cradle empty and the house deserted. Where should she go? She did not know as yet. Perhaps to her aunt at Orléans, perhaps to Savigny, no matter where. What she must do first of all was—go, fly from that atmosphere of treachery and falsehood.

At that moment she was in her bedroom, packing a trunk, making a pile of her effects—a heartrending occupation. Every object that she touched set in motion whole worlds of thoughts, of memories. There is so much of ourselves in anything that we use. At times the odor of a sachet-bag, the pattern of a bit of lace, were enough to bring tears to her eyes. Suddenly she heard a heavy footstep in the salon, the door of which was partly open; then there was a slight cough, as if to let her know that some one was there. She supposed that it was Risler: for no one else had the right to enter her apartments so unceremoniously. The idea of having to endure the presence of that hypocritical face, that false smile, was so distasteful to her that she rushed to close the door.

"I am not at home to any one."

The door resisted her efforts, and Sigismond's square head appeared in the opening.

"It is I, Madame," he said in an undertone. "I have come to get the money."

"What money?" demanded Claire, for she no longer remembered why she had gone to Savigny.

"Hush! The funds to meet my note to-morrow. Monsieur Georges, when he went out, told me that you would hand it to me very soon."

"Ah! yes—true. The hundred thousand francs.

I haven't them, Monsieur Planus; I haven't anything."

"Then," said the cashier, in a strange voice, as if he were speaking to himself, "then it means failure."

And he turned slowly away.

Failure! She sank on a chair, appalled, crushed. For the last few hours the downfall of her happiness had caused her to forget the downfall of the house; but she remembered now.

So her husband was ruined! In a little while, when he returned home, he would learn of the disaster, and he would learn at the same time that his wife and child had gone; that he was left alone in the midst of the wreck.

Alone—that weak, easily influenced creature, who could only weep and complain and shake his fist at life like a child! What would become of the miserable man?

She pitied him, notwithstanding his great sin.

Then the thought came to her that she would perhaps seem to have fled at the approach of bankruptcy, of poverty.

Georges might say to himself:

"Had I been rich, she would have forgiven me!"

Ought she to allow him to entertain that doubt?

To a generous, noble heart like Claire's nothing more than that was necessary to change her plans. Instantly she was conscious that her feeling of repugnance, of revolt, began to grow less bitter, and a sudden

ray of light seemed to make her duty clearer to her. When they came to tell her that the child was dressed and the trunks ready, her mind was made up anew.

"Never mind," she replied gently. "We are not going away."

CHAPTER XXI

THE DAY OF RECKONING

THE great clock of Saint-Gervais struck one in the morning. It was so cold that the fine snow, flying through the air, hardened as it fell, covering the pavements with a slippery, white blanket.

Risler, wrapped in his cloak, was hastening home from the brewery through the deserted streets of the Marais. He had been celebrating, in company with his two faithful borrowers, Chèbe and Delobelle, his first moment of leisure, the end of that almost endless period of seclusion during which he had been superintending the manufacture of his press, with all the searchings, the joys, and the disappointments of the inventor. It had been long, very long. At the last moment he had discovered a defect. The crane did not work well; and he had had to revise his plans and drawings. At last, on that very day, the new machine had been tried. Everything had succeeded to his heart's desire. The worthy man was triumphant. It seemed to him that he had paid a debt, by giving the house of Fromont the benefit of a new machine, which would lessen the labor, shorten the hours of the workmen, and at the same time double

the profits and the reputation of the factory. He indulged in beautiful dreams as he plodded along. His footsteps rang out proudly, emphasized by the resolute and happy trend of his thoughts.

Quickening his pace, he reached the corner of Rue des Vieilles-Haudriettes. A long line of carriages was standing in front of the factory, and the light of their lanterns in the street, the shadows of the drivers seeking shelter from the snow in the corners and angles that those old buildings have retained despite the straightening of the sidewalks, gave an animated aspect to that deserted, silent quarter.

"Yes, yes! to be sure," thought the honest fellow, "we have a ball at our house." He remembered that Sidonie was giving a grand musical and dancing party, which she had excused him from attending, by the way, knowing that he was very busy.

Shadows passed and repassed behind the fluttering veil of the curtains; the orchestra seemed to follow the movements of those stealthy apparitions with the rising and falling of its muffled notes. The guests were dancing. Risler let his eyes rest for a moment on that phantasmagoria of the ball, and fancied that he recognized Sidonie's shadow in a small room adjoining the salon.

She was standing erect in her magnificent costume, in the attitude of a pretty woman before her mirror. A shorter shadow behind her, Madame Dobson doubtless, was repairing some accident to the costume, retieing the knot of a ribbon tied about her neck, its long ends floating down to the flounces of the train. It was

all very indistinct, but the woman's graceful figure was recognizable in those faintly traced outlines, and Risler tarried long admiring her.

The contrast on the first floor was most striking. There was no light visible, with the exception of a little lamp shining through the lilac hangings of the bedroom. Risler noticed that circumstance, and as the little girl had been ailing a few days before, he felt anxious about her, remembering Madame Georges's strange agitation when she passed him so hurriedly in the afternoon; and he retraced his steps as far as Père Achille's lodge to inquire.

The lodge was full. Coachmen were warming themselves around the stove, chatting and laughing amid the smoke from their pipes. When Risler appeared there was profound silence, a cunning, inquisitive, significant silence. They had evidently been speaking of him.

"Is the Fromont child still sick?" he asked.

"No, not the child, Monsieur."

"Monsieur Georges sick?"

"Yes, he was taken when he came home to-night. I went right off to get the doctor. He said that it wouldn't amount to anything—that all Monsieur needed was rest."

As Risler closed the door Père Achille added, under his breath, with the half-fearful, half-audacious insolence of an inferior, who would like to be listened to and yet not distinctly heard:

"Ah! *dame*, they're not making such a show on the first floor as they are on the second."

This is what had happened.

Fromont Jeune, on returning home during the evening, had found his wife with such a changed, heart-broken face, that he at once divined a catastrophe. But he had become so accustomed in the past two years to sin with impunity that it did not for one moment occur to him that his wife could have been informed of his conduct. Claire, for her part, to avoid humiliating him, was generous enough to speak only of Savigny.

"Grandpapa refused," she said.

The miserable man turned frightfully pale.

"I am lost—I am lost!" he muttered two or three times in the wild accents of fever; and his sleepless nights, a last terrible scene which he had had with Sidonie, trying to induce her not to give this party on the eve of his downfall, M. Gardinois' refusal, all these maddening things which followed so closely on one another's heels and had agitated him terribly, culminated in a genuine nervous attack. Claire took pity on him, put him to bed, and established herself by his side; but her voice had lost that affectionate intonation which soothes and persuades. There was in her gestures, in the way in which she arranged the pillow under the patient's head and prepared a quieting draught, a strange indifference, listlessness.

"But I have ruined you!" Georges said from time to time, as if to rouse her from that apathy which made him uncomfortable. She replied with a proud, disdainful gesture. Ah! if he had done only that to her!

At last, however, his nerves became calmer, the fever subsided, and he fell asleep.

She remained to attend to his wants.

"It is my duty," she said to herself.

Her duty. She had reached that point with the man whom she had adored so blindly, with the hope of a long and happy life together.

At that moment the ball in Sidonie's apartments began to become very animated. The ceiling trembled rhythmically, for Madame had had all the carpets removed from her salons for the greater comfort of the dancers. Sometimes, too, the sound of voices reached Claire's ears in waves, and frequent tumultuous applause, from which one could divine the great number of the guests, the crowded condition of the rooms.

Claire was lost in thought. She did not waste time in regrets, in fruitless lamentations. She knew that life was inflexible and that all the arguments in the world will not arrest the cruel logic of its inevitable progress. She did not ask herself how that man had succeeded in deceiving her so long—how he could have sacrificed the honor and happiness of his family for a mere caprice. That was the fact, and all her reflections could not wipe it out, could not repair the irreparable. The subject that engrossed her thoughts was the future. A new existence was unfolding before her eyes, dark, cruel, full of privation and toil; and, strangely enough, the prospect of ruin, instead of terrifying her, restored all her courage. The idea of the change of abode made necessary by the economy they would be obliged to practise, of work made compulsory for Georges and perhaps for herself, infused an indefinable energy into the distressing calmness of her despair. What a heavy

burden of souls she would have with her three children; her mother, her child, and her husband! The feeling of responsibility prevented her giving way too much to her misfortune, to the wreck of her love; and in proportion as she forgot herself in the thought of the weak creatures she had to protect she realized more fully the meaning of the word "sacrifice," so vague on careless lips, so serious when it becomes a rule of life.

Such were the poor woman's thoughts during that sad vigil, a vigil of arms and tears, while she was preparing her forces for the great battle. Such was the scene lighted by the modest little lamp which Risler had seen from below, like a star fallen from the radiant chandeliers of the ballroom.

Reassured by Père Achille's reply, the honest fellow thought of going up to his bedroom, avoiding the festivities and the guests, for whom he cared little.

On such occasions he used a small servants' staircase communicating with the counting-room. So he walked through the many-windowed workshops, which the moon, reflected by the snow, made as light as at noonday. He breathed the atmosphere of the day of toil, a hot, stifling atmosphere, heavy with the odor of boiled talc and varnish. The papers spread out on the dryers formed long, rustling paths. On all sides tools were lying about, and blouses hanging here and there ready for the morrow. Risler never walked through the shops without a feeling of pleasure.

Suddenly he spied a light in Planus's office, at the end of that long line of deserted rooms. The old

cashier was still at work, at one o'clock in the morning! That was really most extraordinary.

Risler's first impulse was to retrace his steps. In fact, since his unaccountable falling-out with Sigismond, since the cashier had adopted that attitude of cold silence toward him, he had avoided meeting him. His wounded friendship had always led him to shun an explanation; he had a sort of pride in not asking Planus why he bore him ill-will. But, on that evening, Risler felt so strongly the need of cordial sympathy, of pouring out his heart to some one, and then it was such an excellent opportunity for a *tête-à-tête* with his former friend, that he did not try to avoid him but boldly entered the counting-room.

The cashier was sitting there, motionless, among heaps of papers and great books, which he had been turning over, some of which had fallen to the floor. At the sound of his employer's footsteps he did not even lift his eyes. He had recognized Risler's step. The latter, somewhat abashed, hesitated a moment; then, impelled by one of those secret springs which we have within us and which guide us, despite ourselves, in the path of our destiny, he walked straight to the cashier's grating.

"Sigismond," he said in a grave voice.

The old man raised his head and displayed a shrunken face down which two great tears were rolling, the first perhaps that that animate column of figures had ever shed in his life.

"You are weeping, old man? What troubles you?"

And honest Risler, deeply touched, held out his hand to his friend, who hastily withdrew his. That move-

ment of repulsion was so instinctive, so brutal, that all Risler's emotion changed to indignation.

He drew himself up with stern dignity.

"I offer you my hand, Sigismond Planus!" he said.

"And I refuse to take it," said Planus, rising.

There was a terrible pause, during which they heard the muffled music of the orchestra upstairs and the noise of the ball, the dull, wearing noise of floors shaken by the rhythmic movement of the dance.

"Why do you refuse to take my hand?" demanded Risler simply, while the grating upon which he leaned trembled with a metallic quiver.

Sigismond was facing him, with both hands on his desk, as if to emphasize and drive home what he was about to say in reply.

"Why? Because you have ruined the house; because in a few hours a messenger from the Bank will come and stand where you are, to collect a hundred thousand francs; and because, thanks to you, I haven't a sou in the cash-box—that's the reason why!"

Risler was stupefied.

"I have ruined the house—I?"

"Worse than that, Monsieur. You have allowed it to be ruined by your wife, and you have arranged with her to benefit by our ruin and your dishonor. Oh! I can see your game well enough. The money your wife has wormed out of the wretched Fromont, the house at Asnières, the diamonds and all the rest is invested in her name, of course, out of reach of disaster; and of course you can retire from business now."

"Oh—oh!" exclaimed Risler in a faint voice, a re-

strained voice rather, that was insufficient for the multitude of thoughts it strove to express; and as he stammered helplessly he drew the grating toward him with such force that he broke off a piece of it. Then he staggered, fell to the floor, and lay there motionless, speechless, retaining only, in what little life was still left in him, the firm determination not to die until he had justified himself. That determination must have been very powerful; for while his temples throbbed madly, hammered by the blood that turned his face purple, while his ears were ringing and his glazed eyes seemed already turned toward the terrible unknown, the unhappy man muttered to himself in a thick voice, like the voice of a shipwrecked man speaking with his mouth full of water in a howling gale: "I must live—I must live!"

When he recovered consciousness, he was sitting on the cushioned bench on which the workmen sat huddled together on pay-day, his cloak on the floor, his cravat untied, his shirt open at the neck, cut by Sigismond's knife. Luckily for him, he had cut his hands when he tore the grating apart; the blood had flowed freely, and that accident was enough to avert an attack of apoplexy. On opening his eyes, he saw on either side old Sigismond and Madame Georges, whom the cashier had summoned in his distress. As soon as Risler could speak, he said to her in a choking voice:

"Is this true, Madame Chorche—is this true that he just told me?"

She had not the courage to deceive him, so she turned her eyes away.

"So," continued the poor fellow, "so the house is ruined, and I——"

"No, Risler, my friend. No, not you."

"My wife, was it not? Oh! it is horrible! This is how I have paid my debt of gratitude to you. But you, Madame Chorche, you could not have believed that I was a party to this infamy?"

"No, my friend, no; be calm. I know that you are the most honorable man on earth."

He looked at her a moment, with trembling lips and clasped hands, for there was something child-like in all the manifestations of that artless nature.

"Oh! Madame Chorche, Madame Chorche," he murmured. "When I think that I am the one who has ruined you."

In the terrible blow which overwhelmed him, and by which his heart, overflowing with love for Sidonie, was most deeply wounded, he refused to see anything but the financial disaster to the house of Fromont, caused by his blind devotion to his wife. Suddenly he stood erect.

"Come," he said, "let us not give way to emotion. We must see about settling our accounts."

Madame Fromont was frightened.

"Risler, Risler—where are you going?"

She thought that he was going up to Georges' room.

Risler understood her and smiled in superb disdain.

"Never fear, Madame. Monsieur Georges can sleep in peace. I have something more urgent to do than avenge my honor as a husband. Wait for me here. I will come back."

He darted toward the narrow staircase; and Claire, relying upon his word, remained with Planus during one of those supreme moments of uncertainty which seem interminable because of all the conjectures with which they are thronged.

A few moments later the sound of hurried steps, the rustling of silk filled the dark and narrow staircase. Sidonie appeared first, in ball costume, gorgeously arrayed and so pale that the jewels that glistened everywhere on her dead-white flesh seemed more alive than she, as if they were scattered over the cold marble of a statue. The breathlessness due to dancing, the trembling of intense excitement and her rapid descent, caused her to shake from head to foot, and her floating ribbons, her ruffles, her flowers, her rich and fashionable attire drooped tragically about her. Risler followed her, laden with jewel-cases, caskets, and papers. Upon reaching his apartments he had pounced upon his wife's desk, seized everything valuable that it contained, jewels, certificates, title-deeds of the house at Asnières; then, standing in the doorway, he had shouted into the ballroom:

"Madame Risler!"

She had run quickly to him, and that brief scene had in no wise disturbed the guests, then at the height of the evening's enjoyment. When she saw her husband standing in front of the desk, the drawers broken open and overturned on the carpet with the multitude of trifles they contained, she realized that something terrible was taking place.

"Come at once," said Risler; "I know all."

She tried to assume an innocent, dignified attitude; but he seized her by the arm with such force that Frantz's words came to her mind: "It will kill him perhaps, but he will kill you first." As she was afraid of death, she allowed herself to be led away without resistance, and had not even the strength to lie.

"Where are we going?" she asked, in a low voice.

Risler did not answer. She had only time to throw over her shoulders, with the care for herself that never failed her, a light tulle veil, and he dragged her, pushed her, rather, down the stairs leading to the counting-room, which he descended at the same time, his steps close upon hers, fearing that his prey would escape.

"There!" he said, as he entered the room. "We have stolen, we make restitution. Look, Planus, you can raise money with all this stuff." And he placed on the cashier's desk all the fashionable plunder with which his arms were filled—feminine trinkets, trivial aids to coquetry, stamped papers.

Then he turned to his wife:

"Take off your jewels! Come, be quick."

She complied slowly, opened reluctantly the clasps of bracelets and buckles, and above all the superb fastening of her diamond necklace on which the initial of her name—a gleaming S—resembled a sleeping serpent, imprisoned in a circle of gold. Risler, thinking that she was too slow, ruthlessly broke the fragile fastenings. Luxury shrieked beneath his fingers, as if it were being whipped.

"Now it is my turn," he said; "I too must give up

everything. Here is my portfolio. What else have I? What else have I?"

He searched his pockets feverishly.

"Ah! my watch. With the chain it will bring four thousand francs. My rings, my wedding-ring. Everything goes into the cash-box, everything. We have a hundred thousand francs to pay this morning. As soon as it is daylight we must go to work, sell out and pay our debts. I know some one who wants the house at Asnières. That can be settled at once."

He alone spoke and acted. Sigismond and Madame Georges watched him without speaking. As for Sidonie, she seemed unconscious, lifeless. The cold air blowing from the garden through the little door, which was opened at the time of Risler's swoon, made her shiver, and she mechanically drew the folds of her scarf around her shoulders, her eyes fixed on vacancy, her thoughts wandering. Did she not hear the violins of her ball, which reached their ears in the intervals of silence, like bursts of savage irony, with the heavy thud of the dancers shaking the floors? An iron hand, falling upon her, aroused her abruptly from her torpor. Risler had taken her by the arm, and, leading her before his partner's wife, he said:

"Down on your knees!"

Madame Fromont drew back, remonstrating:

"No, no, Risler, not that."

"It must be," said the implacable Risler. "Restitution, reparation! Down on your knees then, wretched woman!" And with irresistible force he threw Sidonie at Claire's feet; then, still holding her arm:

"You will repeat after me, word for word, what I say: Madame——"

Sidonie, half dead with fear, repeated faintly: "Madame——"

"A whole lifetime of humility and submission——"

"A whole lifetime of humil—— No, I can not!" she exclaimed, springing to her feet with the agility of a deer; and, wresting herself from Risler's grasp, through that open door which had tempted her from the beginning of this horrible scene, luring her out into the darkness of the night to the liberty obtainable by flight, she rushed from the house, braving the falling snow and the wind that stung her bare shoulders.

"Stop her, stop her!—Risler, Planus, I implore you! In pity's name do not let her go in this way," cried Claire.

Planus stepped toward the door.

Risler detained him.

"I forbid you to stir! I ask your pardon, Madame, but we have more important matters than this to consider. Madame Risler concerns us no longer. We have to save the honor of the house of Fromont, which alone is at stake, which alone fills my thoughts at this moment."

Sigismond put out his hand.

"You are a noble man, Risler. Forgive me for having suspected you."

Risler pretended not to hear him.

"A hundred thousand francs to pay, you say? How much is there left in the strong-box?"

He sat gravely down behind the grating, looking

over the books of account, the certificates of stock in the funds, opening the jewel-cases, estimating with Planus, whose father had been a jeweller, the value of all those diamonds, which he had once so admired on his wife, having no suspicion of their real value.

Meanwhile Claire, trembling from head to foot, looked out through the window at the little garden, white with snow, where Sidonie's footsteps were already effaced by the fast-falling flakes, as if to bear witness that that precipitate departure was without hope of return.

Up-stairs they were still dancing. The mistress of the house was supposed to be busy with the preparations for supper, while she was flying, bare-headed, forcing back sobs and shrieks of rage.

Where was she going? She had started off like a mad woman, running across the garden and the court-yard of the factory, and under the dark arches, where the cruel, freezing wind blew in eddying circles. Père Achille did not recognize her; he had seen so many shadows wrapped in white pass his lodge that night.

The young woman's first thought was to join the tenor Cazaboni, whom at the last she had not dared to invite to her ball; but he lived at Montmartre, and that was very far away for her to go, in that garb; and then, would he be at home? Her parents would take her in, doubtless; but she could already hear Madame Chèbe's lamentations and the little man's sermon under three heads. Thereupon she thought of Delobelle, her old Delobelle. In the downfall of all her splendors she remembered the man who had first initiated her into

fashionable life, who had given her lessons in dancing and deportment when she was a little girl, laughed at her pretty ways, and taught her to look upon herself as beautiful before any one had ever told her that she was so. Something told her that that fallen star would take her part against all others. She entered one of the carriages standing at the gate and ordered the driver to take her to the actor's lodgings on the Boulevard Beaumarchais.

For some time past Mamma Delobelle had been making straw hats for export—a dismal trade if ever there was one, which brought in barely two francs fifty for twelve hours' work.

And Delobelle continued to grow fat in the same degree that his "sainted wife" grew thin. At the very moment when some one knocked hurriedly at his door he had just discovered a fragrant soup *au fromage*, which had been kept hot in the ashes on the hearth. The actor, who had been witnessing at Beaumarchais some dark-browed melodrama drenched with gore even to the illustrated headlines of its poster, was startled by that knock at such an advanced hour.

"Who is there?" he asked in some alarm.

"It is I, Sidonie. Open the door quickly."

She entered the room, shivering all over, and, throwing aside her wrap, went close to the stove where the fire was almost extinct. She began to talk at once, to pour out the wrath that had been stifling her for an hour, and while she was describing the scene in the factory, lowering her voice because of Madame Delobelle, who

was asleep close by, the magnificence of her costume in that poor, bare, fifth floor, the dazzling whiteness of her disordered finery amid the heaps of coarse hats and the wisps of straw strewn about the room, all combined to produce the effect of a veritable drama, of one of those terrible upheavals of life when rank, feelings, fortunes are suddenly jumbled together.

"Oh! I never shall return home. It is all over. Free—I am free!"

"But who could have betrayed you to your husband?" asked the actor.

"It was Frantz! I am sure it was Frantz. He wouldn't have believed it from anybody else. Only last evening a letter came from Egypt. Oh! how he treated me before that woman! To force me to kneel! But I'll be revenged. Luckily I took something to revenge myself with before I came away.

And the smile of former days played about the corners of her pale lips.

The old strolling player listened to it all with deep interest. Notwithstanding his compassion for that poor devil of a Risler, and for Sidonie herself, for that matter, who seemed to him, in theatrical parlance, "a beautiful culprit," he could not help viewing the affair from a purely scenic standpoint, and finally cried out, carried away by his hobby:

"What a first-class situation for a fifth act!"

She did not hear him. Absorbed by some evil thought, which made her smile in anticipation, she stretched out to the fire her dainty shoes, saturated with snow, and her openwork stockings.

"Well, what do you propose to do now?" Delobelle asked after a pause.

"Stay here till daylight and get a little rest. Then I will see."

"I have no bed to offer you, my poor girl. Mamma Delobelle has gone to bed."

"Don't you worry about me, my dear Delobelle. I'll sleep in that armchair. I won't be in your way, I tell you!"

The actor heaved a sigh.

"Ah! yes, that armchair. It was our poor Zizi's. She sat up many a night in it, when work was pressing. Ah, me! those who leave this world are much the happiest."

He had always at hand such selfish, comforting maxims. He had no sooner uttered that one than he discovered with dismay that his soup would soon be stone-cold. Sidonie noticed his movement.

"Why, you were just eating your supper, weren't you? Pray go on."

"*Dame!* yes, what would you have? It's part of the trade, of the hard existence we fellows have. For you see, my girl, I stand firm. I haven't given up. I never will give up."

What still remained of Désirée's soul in that wretched household in which she had lived twenty years must have shuddered at that terrible declaration. He never would give up!

"No matter what people may say," continued Delobelle, "it's the noblest profession in the world. You are free; you depend upon nobody. Devoted to the

service of glory and the public! Ah! I know what I would do in your place. As if you were born to live with all those *bourgeois*—the devil! What you need is the artistic life, the fever of success, the unexpected, intense emotion."

As he spoke he took his seat, tucked his napkin in his neck, and helped himself to a great plateful of soup.

"To say nothing of the fact that your triumphs as a pretty woman would in no wise interfere with your triumph as an actress. By the way, do you know, you must take a few lessons in elocution. With your voice, your intelligence, your charms, you would have a magnificent prospect."

Then he added abruptly, as if to initiate her into the joys of the dramatic art:

"But it occurs to me that perhaps you have not supped! Excitement makes one hungry; sit there, and take this soup. I am sure that you haven't eaten soup *au fromage* for a long while."

He turned the closet topsy-turvy to find her a spoon and a napkin; and she took her seat opposite him, assisting him and laughing a little at the difficulties attending her entertainment. She was less pale already, and there was a pretty sparkle in her eyes, composed of the tears of a moment before and the present gayety.

The strolling actress! All her happiness in life was lost forever: honor, family, wealth. She was driven from her house, stripped, dishonored. She had undergone all possible humiliations and disasters. That did not prevent her supping with a wonderful appetite and joyously holding her own under Delobelle's jocose

remarks concerning her vocation and her future triumphs. She felt light-hearted and happy, fairly embarked for the land of Bohemia, her true country. What more would happen to her? Of how many ups and downs was her new, unforeseen, and whimsical existence to consist? She thought about that as she fell asleep in Désirée's great easy-chair; but she thought of her revenge, too—her cherished revenge which she held in her hand, all ready for use, and so unerring, so fierce!

CHAPTER XXII

THE NEW EMPLOYÉ OF THE HOUSE OF FROMONT

IT was broad daylight when Fromont Jeune awoke. All night long, between the drama that was being enacted below him and the festivity in joyous progress above, he slept with clenched fists, the deep sleep of complete prostration like that of a condemned man on the eve of his execution or of a defeated General on the night following his disaster; a sleep from which one would wish never to awake, and in which, in the absence of all sensation, one has a foretaste of death.

The bright light streaming through his curtains, made more dazzling by the deep snow with which the garden and the surrounding roofs were covered, recalled him to the consciousness of things as they were. He felt a shock throughout his whole being, and, even before his mind began to work, that vague impression of melancholy which misfortunes, momentarily forgotten, leave in their place. All the familiar noises of the factory, the dull throbbing of the machinery, were in full activity. So the world still existed! and by slow degrees the idea of his own responsibility awoke in him.

"To-day is the day," he said to himself, with an involuntary movement toward the dark side of the room, as if he longed to bury himself anew in his long sleep.

The factory bell rang, then other bells in the neighborhood, then the Angelus.

"Noon! Already! How I have slept!"

He felt some little remorse and a great sense of relief at the thought that the drama of settling-day had passed off without him. What had they done downstairs? Why did they not call him?

He rose, drew the curtains aside, and saw Risler and Sigismond talking together in the garden. And it was so long since they had spoken to each other! What in heaven's name had happened? When he was ready to go down he found Claire at the door of his room.

"You must not go out," she said.

"Why not?"

"Stay here. I will explain it to you."

"But what's the matter? Did any one come from the Bank?"

"Yes, they came—the notes are paid."

"Paid?"

"Risler obtained the money. He has been rushing about with Planus since early morning. It seems that his wife had superb jewels. The diamond necklace alone brought twenty thousand francs. He has also sold their house at Asnières with all it contained; but as time was required to record the deed, Planus and his sister advanced the money."

She turned away from him as she spoke. He, on his side, hung his head to avoid her glance.

"Risler is an honorable man," she continued, "and when he learned from whom his wife received all her magnificent things——"

"What!" exclaimed Georges in dismay. "He knows?"

"All," Claire replied, lowering her voice.

The wretched man turned pale, stammered feebly:

"Why, then—you?"

"Oh! I knew it all before Risler. Remember, that when I came home last night, I told you I had heard very cruel things down at Savigny, and that I would have given ten years of my life not to have taken that journey."

"Claire!"

Moved by a mighty outburst of affection, he stepped toward his wife; but her face was so cold, so sad, so resolute, her despair was so plainly written in the stern indifference of her whole bearing, that he dared not take her in his arms as he longed to do, but simply murmured under his breath:

"Forgive!—forgive!"

"You must think me strangely calm," said the brave woman; "but I shed all my tears yesterday. You may have thought that I was weeping over our ruin; you were mistaken. While one is young and strong as we are, such cowardly conduct is not permissible. We are armed against want and can fight it face to face. No, I was weeping for our departed happiness, for you, for the madness that led you to throw away your only, your true friend."

She was lovely, lovelier than Sidonie had ever been, as she spoke thus, enveloped by a pure light which seemed to fall upon her from a great height, like the radiance of a fathomless, cloudless sky; whereas the other's irregular features had always seemed to owe their brilliancy, their saucy, insolent charm to the false glamour of the footlights in some cheap theatre. The touch of statuesque immobility formerly noticeable in Claire's face was vivified by anxiety, by doubt, by all the torture of passion; and like those gold ingots which have their full value only when the Mint has placed its stamp upon them, those beautiful features stamped with the effigy of sorrow had acquired since the preceding day an ineffaceable expression which perfected their beauty.

Georges gazed at her in admiration. She seemed to him more alive, more womanly, and worthy of adoration because of their separation and all the obstacles that he now knew to stand between them. Remorse, despair, shame entered his heart simultaneously with this new love, and he would have fallen on his knees before her.

"No, no, do not kneel," said Claire; "if you knew of what you remind me, if you knew what a lying face, distorted with hatred, I saw at my feet last night!"

"Ah! but I am not lying," replied Georges with a shudder. "Claire, I implore you, in the name of our child——"

At that moment some one knocked at the door.

"Rise, I beg of you! You see that life has claims

upon us," she said in a low voice and with a bitter smile; then she asked what was wanted.

Monsieur Risler had sent for Monsieur to come down to the office.

"Very well," she said; "say that he will come."

Georges approached the door, but she stopped him.

"No, let me go. He must not see you yet."

"But——"

"I wish you to stay here. You have no idea of the indignation and wrath of that poor man, whom you have deceived. If you had seen him last night, crushing his wife's wrists!"

As she said it she looked him in the face with a curiosity most cruel to herself; but Georges did not wince, and replied simply:

"My life belongs to him."

"It belongs to me, too; and I do not wish you to go down. There has been scandal enough in my father's house. Remember that the whole factory is aware of what is going on. Every one is watching us, spying upon us. It required all the authority of the foremen to keep the men busy to-day, to compel them to keep their inquisitive looks on their work."

"But I shall seem to be hiding."

"And suppose it were so! That is just like a man. They do not recoil from the worst crimes: betraying a wife, betraying a friend; but the thought that they may be accused of being afraid touches them more keenly than anything. Moreover, listen to what I say. Sidonie has gone; she has gone forever; and if you leave this house I shall think that you have gone to join her."

"Very well, I will stay," said Georges. "I will do whatever you wish."

Claire descended into Planus' office.

To see Risler striding to and fro, with his hands behind his back, as calm as usual, no one would ever have suspected all that had taken place in his life since the night before. As for Sigismond, he was fairly beaming, for he saw nothing in it all beyond the fact that the notes had been paid at maturity and that the honor of the firm was safe.

When Madame Fromont appeared, Risler smiled sadly and shook his head.

"I thought that you would prefer to come down in his place; but you are not the one with whom I have to deal. It is absolutely necessary that I should see Georges and talk with him. We have paid the notes that fell due this morning; the crisis has passed; but we must come to an understanding about many matters."

"Risler, my friend, I beg you to wait a little longer."

"Why, Madame Chorche, there's not a minute to lose. Oh! I suspect that you fear I may give way to an outbreak of anger. Have no fear—let him have no fear. You know what I told you, that the honor of the house of Fromont is to be assured before my own. I have endangered it by my fault. First of all, I must repair the evil I have done or allowed to be done."

"Your conduct toward us is worthy of all admiration, my good Risler; I know it well."

"Oh! Madame, if you could see him! he's a saint," said poor Sigismond, who, not daring to speak to his

friend, was determined at all events to express his remorse.

"But aren't you afraid?" continued Claire. "Human endurance has its limits. It may be that in presence of the man who has injured you so——"

Risler took her hands, gazed into her eyes with grave admiration, and said:

"You dear creature, who speak of nothing but the injury done to me! Do you not know that I hate him as bitterly for his falseness to you? But nothing of that sort has any existence for me at this moment. You see in me simply a business man who wishes to have an understanding with his partner for the good of the firm. So let him come down without the slightest fear, and if you dread any outbreak on my part, stay here with us. I shall need only to look at my old master's daughter to be reminded of my promise and my duty."

"I trust you, my friend," said Claire; and she went up to bring her husband.

The first minute of the interview was terrible. Georges was deeply moved, humiliated, pale as death. He would have preferred a hundred times over to be looking into the barrel of that man's pistol at twenty paces, awaiting his fire, instead of appearing before him as an unpunished culprit and being compelled to confine his feelings within the commonplace limits of a business conversation.

Risler pretended not to look at him, and continued to pace the floor as he talked:

"Our house is passing through a terrible crisis. We

have averted the disaster for to-day; but this is not the last of our obligations. That cursed invention has kept my mind away from the business for a long while. Luckily, I am free now, and able to attend to it. But you must give your attention to it as well. The workmen and clerks have followed the example of their employers to some extent. Indeed, they have become extremely negligent and indifferent. This morning, for the first time in a year, they began work at the proper time. I expect that you will make it your business to change all that. As for me, I shall work at my drawings again. Our patterns are old-fashioned. We must have new ones for the new machines. I have great confidence in our presses. The experiments have succeeded beyond my hopes. We unquestionably have in them a means of building up our business. I didn't tell you sooner because I wished to surprise you; but we have no more surprises for each other, have we, Georges?"

There was such a stinging note of irony in his voice that Claire shuddered, fearing an outbreak; but he continued, in his natural tone.

"Yes, I think I can promise that in six months the Risler Press will begin to show magnificent results. But those six months will be very hard to live through. We must limit ourselves, cut down our expenses, save in every way that we can. We have five draughtsmen now; hereafter we will have but two. I will undertake to make the absence of the others of no consequence by working at night myself. Furthermore, beginning with this month, I abandon my interest in the firm. I will

take my salary as foreman as I took it before, and nothing more."

Fromont attempted to speak, but a gesture from his wife restrained him, and Risler continued:

"I am no longer your partner, Georges. I am once more the clerk that I never should have ceased to be. From this day our partnership articles are cancelled. I insist upon it, you understand; I insist upon it. We will remain in that relation to each other until the house is out of difficulty and I can—— But what I shall do then concerns me alone. This is what I wanted to say to you, Georges. You must give your attention to the factory diligently; you must show yourself, make it felt that you are master now, and I believe there will turn out to be, among all our misfortunes, some that can be retrieved."

During the silence that followed, they heard the sound of wheels in the garden, and two great furniture vans stopped at the door.

"I beg your pardon," said Risler, "but I must leave you a moment. Those are the vans from the public auction rooms; they have come to take away my furniture from upstairs."

"What! you are going to sell your furniture too?" asked Madame Fromont.

"Certainly—to the last piece. I am simply giving it back to the firm. It belongs to it."

"But that is impossible," said Georges. "I can not allow that."

Risler turned upon him indignantly.

"What's that? What is it that you can't allow?"

Claire checked him with an imploring gesture.

"True—true!" he muttered; and he hurried from the room to escape the sudden temptation to give vent to all that was in his heart.

The second floor was deserted. The servants, who had been paid and dismissed in the morning, had abandoned the apartments to the disorder of the day following a ball; and they wore the aspect peculiar to places where a drama has been enacted, and which are left in suspense, as it were, between the events that have happened and those that are still to happen. The open doors, the rugs lying in heaps in the corners, the salvers laden with glasses, the preparations for the supper, the table still set and untouched, the dust from the dancing on all the furniture, its odor mingled with the fumes of punch, of withered flowers, of rice-powder—all these details attracted Risler's notice as he entered.

In the disordered salon the piano was open, the bacchanal from *Orphée aux Enfers* on the music-shelf, and the gaudy hangings surrounding that scene of desolation, the chairs overturned, as if in fear, reminded one of the saloon of a wrecked packet-boat, of one of those ghostly nights of watching when one is suddenly informed, in the midst of a *fête* at sea, that the ship has sprung a leak, that she is taking in water in every part.

The men began to remove the furniture. Risler watched them at work with an indifferent air, as if he were in a stranger's house. That magnificence which had once made him so happy and proud inspired in him now an insurmountable disgust. But, when he

entered his wife's bedroom, he was conscious of a vague emotion.

It was a large room, hung with blue satin under white lace. A veritable cocotte's nest. There were torn and rumpled tulle ruffles lying about, bows, and artificial flowers. The wax candles around the mirror had burned down to the end and cracked the candlesticks; and the bed, with its lace flounces and valances, its great curtains raised and drawn back, untouched in the general confusion, seemed like the bed of a corpse, a state bed on which no one would ever sleep again.

Risler's first feeling upon entering the room was one of mad indignation, a longing to fall upon the things before him, to tear and rend and shatter everything. Nothing, you see, resembles a woman so much as her bedroom. Even when she is absent, her image still smiles in the mirrors that have reflected it. A little something of her, of her favorite perfume, remains in everything she has touched. Her attitudes are reproduced in the cushions of her couch, and one can follow her goings and comings between the mirror and the toilette table in the pattern of the carpet. The one thing above all others in that room that recalled Sidonie was an étagère covered with childish toys, petty, trivial knickknacks, microscopic fans, dolls' tea-sets, gilded shoes, little shepherds and shepherdesses facing one another, exchanging cold, gleaming, porcelain glances. That étagère was Sidonie's very soul, and her thoughts, always commonplace, petty, vain, and empty, resembled those gewgaws. Yes, in very truth, if Risler, while he held her in his grasp last night, had in his frenzy

broken that fragile little head, a whole world of étagère ornaments would have come from it in place of a brain.

The poor man was thinking sadly of all these things amid the ringing of hammers and the heavy footsteps of the furniture-movers, when he heard an interloping, authoritative step behind him, and Monsieur Chèbe appeared, little Monsieur Chèbe, flushed and breathless, with flames darting from his eyes. He assumed, as always, a very high tone with his son-in-law.

"What does this mean? What is this I hear? Ah! so you're moving, are you?"

"I am not moving, Monsieur Chèbe—I am selling out."

The little man gave a leap like a scalded fish.

"You are selling out? What are you selling, pray?"

"I am selling everything," said Risler in a hollow voice, without even looking at him.

"Come, come, son-in-law, be reasonable. God knows I don't say that Sidonie's conduct—— But, for my part, I know nothing about it. I never wanted to know anything. Only I must remind you of your dignity. People wash their dirty linen in private, deuce take it! They don't make spectacles of themselves as you've been doing ever since morning. Just see everybody at the workshop windows; and on the porch, too! Why, you're the talk of the quarter, my dear fellow."

"So much the better. The dishonor was public, the reparation must be public, too."

This apparent coolness, this indifference to all his observations, exasperated Monsieur Chèbe. He suddenly changed his tactics, and adopted, in addressing

his son-in-law, the serious, peremptory tone which one uses with children or lunatics.

"Well, I say that you haven't any right to take anything away from here. I remonstrate formally, with all my strength as a man, with all my authority as a father. Do you suppose I am going to let you drive my child into the street. No, indeed! Oh! no, indeed! Enough of such nonsense as that! Nothing more shall go out of these rooms."

And Monsieur Chèbe, having closed the door, planted himself in front of it with a heroic gesture. Deuce take it! his own interest was at stake in the matter. The fact was that when his child was once in the gutter he ran great risk of not having a feather bed to sleep on himself. He was superb in that attitude of an indignant father, but he did not keep it long. Two hands, two vises, seized his wrists, and he found himself in the middle of the room, leaving the doorway clear for the workmen.

"Chèbe, my boy, just listen," said Risler, leaning over him. "I am at the end of my forbearance. Since this morning I have been making superhuman efforts to restrain myself, but it would take very little now to make my anger burst all bonds, and woe to the man on whom it falls! I am quite capable of killing some one. Come! Be off at once!——"

There was such an intonation in his son-in-law's voice, and the way that son-in-law shook him as he spoke was so eloquent, that Monsieur Chèbe was fully convinced. He even stammered an apology. Certainly Risler had good reason for acting as he had. All hon-

orable people would be on his side. And he backed toward the door as he spoke. When he reached it, he inquired timidly if Madame Chèbe's little allowance would be continued.

"Yes," was Risler's reply, "but never go beyond it, for my position here is not what it was. I am no longer a partner in the house."

Monsieur Chèbe stared at him in amazement, and assumed the idiotic expression which led many people to believe that the accident that had happened to him —exactly like that of the Duc d'Orléans, you know— was not a fable of his own invention; but he dared not make the slightest observation. Surely some one had changed his son-in-law. Was this really Risler, this tiger-cat, who bristled up at the slightest word and talked of nothing less than killing people?

He took to his heels, recovered his self-possession at the foot of the stairs, and walked across the courtyard with the air of a conqueror.

When all the rooms were cleared and empty, Risler walked through them for the last time, then took the key and went down to Planus's office to hand it to Madame Georges.

"You can let the apartment," he said, "it will be so much added to the income of the factory."

"But you, my friend?"

"Oh! I don't need much. An iron bed up under the eaves. That's all a clerk needs. For, I repeat, I am nothing but a clerk from this time on. A useful clerk, by the way, faithful and courageous, of whom you will have no occasion to complain, I promise you."

Georges, who was going over the books with Planus, was so affected at hearing the poor fellow talk in that strain that he left his seat precipitately. He was suffocated by his sobs. Claire, too, was deeply moved; she went to the new clerk of the house of Fromont and said to him:

"Risler, I thank you in my father's name."

At that moment Père Achille appeared with the mail.

Risler took the pile of letters, opened them tranquilly one by one, and passed them over to Sigismond.

"Here's an order for Lyon. Why wasn't it answered at Saint-Etienne?"

He plunged with all his energy into these details, and he brought to them a keen intelligence, due to the constant straining of the mind toward peace and forgetfulness.

Suddenly, among those huge envelopes, stamped with the names of business houses, the paper of which and the manner of folding suggested the office and hasty despatch, he discovered one smaller one, carefully sealed, and hidden so cunningly between the others that at first he did not notice it. He recognized instantly that long, fine, firm writing,—*To Monsieur Risler—Personal.* It was Sidonie's writing! When he saw it he felt the same sensation he had felt in the bedroom upstairs.

All his love, all the hot wrath of the betrayed husband poured back into his heart with the frantic force that makes assassins. What was she writing to him? What lie had she invented now? He was about to open the letter; then he paused. He realized that, if he

should read that, it would be all over with his courage; so he leaned over to the old cashier, and said in an undertone:

"Sigismond, old friend, will you do me a favor?"

"I should think so!" said the worthy man enthusiastically. He was so delighted to hear his friend speak to him in the kindly voice of the old days.

"Here's a letter some one has written me which I don't wish to read now. I am sure it would interfere with my thinking and living. You must keep it for me, and this with it."

He took from his pocket a little package carefully tied, and handed it to him through the grating.

"That is all I have left of the past, all I have left of that woman. I have determined not to see her, nor anything that reminds me of her, until my task here is concluded, and concluded satisfactorily,—I need all my intelligence, you understand. You will pay the Chèbes' allowance. If she herself should ask for anything, you will give her what she needs. But you will never mention my name. And you will keep this package safe for me until I ask you for it."

Sigismond locked the letter and the package in a secret drawer of his desk with other valuable papers. Risler returned at once to his correspondence; but all the time he had before his eyes the slender English letters traced by a little hand which he had so often and so ardently pressed to his heart.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE CAFE CHANTANT

THAT a rare, what a conscientious clerk did that new employé of the house of Fromont prove himself!

Every day his lamp was the first to appear at, and the last to disappear from, the windows of the factory. A little room had been arranged for him under the eaves, exactly like the one he had formerly occupied with Frantz, a veritable Trappist's cell, furnished with an iron cot and a white wooden table, that stood under his brother's portrait. He led the same busy, regular, quiet life as in those old days.

He worked constantly, and had his meals brought from the same little creamery. But, alas! the disappearance forever of youth and hope deprived those memories of all their charm. Luckily he still had Frantz and Madame "Chorche," the only two human beings of whom he could think without a feeling of sadness. Madame "Chorche" was always at hand, always trying to minister to his comfort, to console him; and Frantz wrote to him often, without mentioning Sidonie, by the way. Risler supposed that some one had told Frantz of the disaster that had befallen him, and

he too avoided all allusion to the subject in his letters. "Oh! when I can send for him to come home!" That was his dream, his sole ambition: to restore the factory and recall his brother.

Meanwhile the days succeeded one another, always the same to him in the restless activity of business and the heartrending loneliness of his grief. Every morning he walked through the workshops, where the profound respect he inspired and his stern, silent countenance had reëstablished the orderly conditions that had been temporarily disturbed. In the beginning there had been much gossip, and various explanations of Sidonie's departure had been made. Some said that she had eloped with a lover, others that Risler had turned her out. The one fact that upset all conjectures was the attitude of the two partners toward each other, apparently as unconstrained as before. Sometimes, however, when they were talking together in the office, with no one by, Risler would suddenly start convulsively, as a vision of the crime passed before his eyes.

Then he would feel a mad longing to spring upon the villain, seize him by the throat, strangle him without mercy; but the thought of Madame "Chorche" was always there to restrain him. Should he be less courageous, less master of himself than that young wife? Neither Claire, nor Fromont, nor anybody else suspected what was in his mind. They could barely detect a severity, an inflexibility in his conduct, which were not habitual with him. Risler awed the workmen now; and those of them upon whom his white hair, blanched in one night, his drawn, prematurely old feat-

ures did not impose respect, quailed before his strange glance—a glance from eyes of a bluish-black like the color of a gun-barrel. Whereas he had always been very kind and affable with the workmen, he had become pitilessly severe in regard to the slightest infraction of the rules. It seemed as if he were taking vengeance upon himself for some indulgence in the past, blind, culpable indulgence, for which he blamed himself.

Surely he was a marvellous employé, was this new officer in the house of Fromont.

Thanks to him, the factory bell, notwithstanding the quavering of its old, cracked voice, had very soon resumed its authority; and the man who guided the whole establishment denied himself the slightest recreation. Sober as an apprentice, he left three-fourths of his salary with Planus for the Chèbes' allowance, but he never asked any questions about them. Punctually on the last day of the month the little man appeared to collect his little income, stiff and formal in his dealings with Sigismond, as became an annuitant on duty. Madame Chèbe had tried to obtain an interview with her son-in-law, whom she pitied and loved; but the mere appearance of her palm-leaf shawl on the steps put Sidonie's husband to flight.

In truth, the courage with which he armed himself was more apparent than real. The memory of his wife never left him. What had become of her? What was she doing? He was almost angry with Planus for never mentioning her. That letter, above all things, that letter which he had had the courage not to open, disturbed him. He thought of it continually. Ah!

had he dared, how he would have liked to ask Sigismond for it!

One day the temptation was too strong. He was alone in the office. The old cashier had gone out to luncheon, leaving the key in his drawer, a most extraordinary thing. Risler could not resist. He opened the drawer, moved the papers, and searched for his letter. It was not there. Sigismond must have put it away even more carefully, perhaps with a foreboding of what actually happened. In his heart Risler was not sorry for his disappointment; for he well knew that, had he found the letter, it would have been the end of the resigned and busy life which he imposed upon himself with so much difficulty.

Through the week it was all very well. Life was endurable, absorbed by the innumerable duties of the factory, and so fatiguing that, when night came, Risler fell on his bed like a lifeless mass. But Sunday was long and sad. The silence of the deserted yards and workshops opened a far wider field to his thoughts. He tried to busy himself, but he missed the encouragement of the others' work. He alone was busy in that great, empty factory whose very breath was arrested. The locked doors, the closed blinds, the hoarse voice of Père Achille playing with his dog in the deserted courtyard, all spoke of solitude. And the whole neighborhood also produced the same effect. In the streets, which seemed wider because of their emptiness, and where the passers-by were few and silent, the bells ringing for vespers had a melancholy sound, and sometimes an echo of the din of Paris, rumbling wheels, a

belated hand-organ, the click of a toy-peddler's clappers, broke the silence, as if to make it even more noticeable.

Risler would try to invent new combinations of flowers and leaves, and, while he handled his pencil, his thoughts, not finding sufficient food there, would escape him, would fly back to his past happiness, to his hopeless misfortunes, would suffer martyrdom, and then, on returning, would ask the poor somnambulist, still seated at his table: "What have you done in my absence?" Alas! he had done nothing.

Oh! the long, heartbreaking, cruel Sundays! Consider that, mingled with all these perplexities in his mind, was the superstitious reverence of the common people for holy days, for the twenty-four hours of rest, wherein one recovers strength and courage. If he had gone out, the sight of a workingman with his wife and child would have made him weep, but his monastic seclusion gave him other forms of suffering, the despair of recluses, their terrible outbreaks of rebellion when the god to whom they have consecrated themselves does not respond to their sacrifices. Now, Risler's god was work, and as he no longer found comfort or serenity therein, he no longer believed in it, but cursed it.

Often in those hours of mental struggle the door of the draughting-room would open gently and Claire Fromont would appear. The poor man's loneliness throughout those long Sunday afternoons filled her with compassion, and she would come with her little girl to keep him company, knowing by experience how contagious is the sweet joyousness of children. The

little one, who could now walk alone, would slip from her mother's arms to run to her friend. Risler would hear the little, hurrying steps. He would feel the light breath behind him, and instantly he would be conscious of a soothing, rejuvenating influence. She would throw her plump little arms around his neck with affectionate warmth, with her artless, causeless laugh, and a kiss from that little mouth which never had lied. Claire Fromont, standing in the doorway, would smile as she looked at them.

"Risler, my friend," she would say, "you must come down into the garden a while,—you work too hard. You will be ill."

"No, no, Madame,—on the contrary, work is what saves me. It keeps me from thinking."

Then, after a long pause, she would continue:

"Come, my dear Risler, you must try to forget."

Risler would shake his head.

"Forget? Is that possible? There are some things beyond one's strength. A man may forgive, but he never forgets."

The child almost always succeeded in dragging him down to the garden. He must play ball, or in the sand, with her; but her playfellow's awkwardness and lack of enthusiasm soon impressed the little girl. Then she would become very sedate, contenting herself with walking gravely between the hedges of box, with her hand in her friend's. After a moment Risler would entirely forget that she was there; but, although he did not realize it, the warmth of that little hand in his had a magnetic, softening effect upon his diseased mind.

A man may forgive, but he never forgets!

Poor Claire herself knew something about it; for she had never forgotten, notwithstanding her great courage and the conception she had formed of her duty. To her, as to Risler, her surroundings were a constant reminder of her sufferings. The objects amid which she lived pitilessly reopened the wound that was ready to close. The staircase, the garden, the courtyard, all those dumb witnesses of her husband's sin, assumed on certain days an implacable expression. Even the careful precaution her husband took to spare her painful reminders, the way in which he called attention to the fact that he no longer went out in the evening, and took pains to tell her where he had been during the day, served only to remind her the more forcibly of his wrong-doing. Sometimes she longed to ask him to forbear,—to say to him: "Do not protest too much." Faith was shattered within her, and the horrible agony of the priest who doubts, and seeks at the same time to remain faithful to his vows, betrayed itself in her bitter smile, her cold, uncomplaining gentleness.

Georges was wofully unhappy. He loved his wife now. The nobility of her character had conquered him. There was admiration in his love, and—why not say it?—Claire's sorrow filled the place of the coquetry which was contrary to her nature, the lack of which had always been a defect in her husband's eyes. He was one of that strange type of men who love to make conquests. Sidonie, capricious and cold as she was, responded to that whim of his heart. After parting from her with a tender farewell, he found her indiffer-

ent and forgetful the next day, and that continual need of wooing her back to him took the place of genuine passion. Serenity in love bored him as a voyage without storms wearies a sailor. On this occasion he had been very near shipwreck with his wife, and the danger had not passed even yet. He knew that Claire was alienated from him and devoted entirely to the child,—the only link between them thenceforth. Their separation made her seem lovelier, more desirable, and he exercised all his powers of fascination to recapture her. He knew how hard a task it would be, and that he had no ordinary, frivolous nature to deal with. But he did not despair. Sometimes a vague gleam in the depths of the mild and apparently impassive glance with which she watched his efforts, bade him hope.

As for Sidonie, he no longer thought of her. Let no one be astonished at that abrupt mental rupture. Those two superficial beings had nothing to attach them securely to each other. Georges was incapable of receiving lasting impressions unless they were continually renewed; Sidonie, for her part, had no power to inspire any noble or durable sentiment. It was one of those intrigues between a cocotte and a coxcomb, compounded of vanity and of wounded self-love, which inspire neither devotion nor constancy, but tragic adventures, duels, suicides which are rarely fatal, and which end in a radical cure. Perhaps, had he seen her again, he might have had a relapse of his disease; but the impetus of flight had carried Sidonie away so swiftly and so far that her return was impossible. At all events, it was a relief for him to be able to live without lying;

and the new life he was leading, a life of hard work and self-denial, with the goal of success in the distance, was not distasteful to him. Luckily; for the courage and determination of both partners were none too much to put the house on its feet once more.

The poor house of Fromont had sprung leaks on all sides. So Père Planus still had wretched nights, haunted by the nightmare of notes maturing and the ominous vision of the little blue man. But, by strict economy, they always succeeded in paying.

Soon four Risler Presses were definitively set up and used in the work of the factory. People began to take a deep interest in them and in the wall-paper trade. Lyons, Caen, Rixheim, the great centres of the industry, were much disturbed concerning that marvellous "rotary and dodecagonal" machine. One fine day the Prochassons appeared, and offered three hundred thousand francs simply for an interest in the patent rights.

"What shall we do?" Fromont Jeune asked Risler Aîné.

The latter shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

"Decide for yourself. It doesn't concern me. I am only an employé."

The words, spoken coldly, without anger, fell heavily upon Fromont's bewildered joy, and reminded him of the gravity of a situation which he was always on the point of forgetting.

But when he was alone with his dear Madame "Chorche," Risler advised her not to accept the Prochassons' offer.

"Wait,—don't be in a hurry. Later you will have a better offer."

He spoke only of them in that affair in which his own share was so glorious. She felt that he was preparing to cut himself adrift from their future.

Meanwhile orders came pouring in and accumulated on their hands. The quality of the paper, the reduced price because of the improved methods of manufacture, made competition impossible. There was no doubt that a colossal fortune was in store for the house of Fromont. The factory had resumed its former flourishing aspect and its loud, business-like hum. Intensely alive were all the great buildings and the hundreds of workmen who filled them. Père Planus never raised his nose from his desk; one could see him from the little garden, leaning over his great ledgers, jotting down in magnificently molded figures the profits of the Risler press.

Risler still worked as before, without change or rest. The return of prosperity brought no alteration in his secluded habits, and from the highest window on the topmost floor of the house he listened to the ceaseless roar of his machines. He was no less gloomy, no less silent. One day, however, it became known at the factory that the press, a specimen of which had been sent to the great Exposition at Manchester, had received the gold medal, whereby its success was definitely established. Madame Georges called Risler into the garden at the luncheon hour, wishing to be the first to tell him the good news.

For the moment a proud smile relaxed his prema-

turely old, gloomy features. His inventor's vanity, his pride in his renown, above all, the idea of repairing thus magnificently the wrong done to the family by his wife, gave him a moment of true happiness. He pressed Claire's hands and murmured, as in the old days:

"I am very happy! I am very happy!"

But what a difference in tone! He said it without enthusiasm, hopelessly, with the satisfaction of a task accomplished, and nothing more.

The bell rang for the workmen to return, and Risler went calmly upstairs to resume his work as on other days.

In a moment he came down again. In spite of all, that news had excited him more than he cared to show. He wandered about the garden, prowled around the counting-room, smiling sadly at Père Planus through the window.

"What ails him?" the old cashier wondered. "What does he want of me?"

At last, when night came and it was time to close the office, Risler summoned courage to go and speak to him.

"Planus, my old friend, I should like——"

He hesitated a moment.

"I should like you to give me the—letter, you know, the little letter and the package."

Sigismond stared at him in amazement. In his innocence, he had imagined that Risler never thought of Sidonie, that he had entirely forgotten her.

"What—you want—?"

"Ah! I have well earned it; I can think of myself a little now. I have thought enough of others."

"You are right," said Planus. "Well, this is what we'll do. The letter and package are at my house at Montrouge. If you choose, we will go and dine together at the Palais-Royal, as in the good old times. I will stand treat. We'll water your medal with a bottle of wine; something choice! Then we'll go to the house together. You can get your trinkets, and if it's too late for you to go home, Mademoiselle Planus, my sister, shall make up a bed for you, and you shall pass the night with us. We are very comfortable there—it's in the country. To-morrow morning at seven o'clock we'll come back to the factory by the first omnibus. Come, old fellow, give me this pleasure. If you don't, I shall think you still bear your old Sigismond a grudge."

Risler accepted. He cared little about celebrating the award of his medal, but he desired to gain a few hours before opening the little letter he had at last earned the right to read.

He must dress. That was quite a serious matter, for he had lived in a workman's jacket during the past six months. And what an event in the factory! Madame Fromont was informed at once.

"Madame, Madame! Monsieur Risler is going out!"

Claire looked at him from her window, and that tall form, bowed by sorrow, leaning on Sigismond's arm, aroused in her a profound, unusual emotion which she remembered ever after.

In the street people bowed to Risler with great interest. Even their greetings warmed his heart. He was

so much in need of kindness! But the noise of vehicles made him a little dizzy.

"My head is spinning," he said to Planus.

"Lean hard on me, old fellow—don't be afraid."

And honest Planus drew himself up, escorting his friend with the artless, unconventional pride of a peasant of the South bearing aloft his village saint.

At last they arrived at the Palais-Royal.

The garden was full of people. They had come to hear the music, and were trying to find seats amid clouds of dust and the scraping of chairs. The two friends hurried into the restaurant to avoid all that turmoil. They established themselves in one of the large salons on the first floor, whence they could see the green trees, the promenaders, and the water spurting from the fountain between the two melancholy flower-gardens. To Sigismond it was the ideal of luxury, that restaurant, with gilding everywhere, around the mirrors, in the chandelier and even on the figured wall-paper. The white napkin, the roll, the menu of a *table d'hôte* dinner filled his soul with joy.

"We are comfortable here, aren't we?" he said to Risler.

And he exclaimed at each of the courses of that banquet at two francs fifty, and insisted on filling his friend's plate.

"Eat that—it's good."

The other, notwithstanding his desire to do honor to the *fête*, seemed preoccupied and gazed out-of-doors.

"Do you remember, Sigismond?" he said, after a pause.

The old cashier, engrossed in his memories of long ago, of Risler's first employment at the factory, replied:

"I should think I do remember—listen! The first time we dined together at the Palais-Royal was in February, 'forty-six, the year we put in the *planches-plates* at the factory."

Risler shook his head.

"Oh! no—I mean three years ago. It was in that room just opposite that we dined on that memorable evening."

And he pointed to the great windows of the salon of Café Véfour, gleaming in the rays of the setting sun like the chandeliers at a wedding feast.

"Ah! yes, true," murmured Sigismond, abashed. What an unlucky idea of his to bring his friend to a place that recalled such painful things!

Risler, not wishing to cast a gloom upon their banquet, abruptly raised his glass.

"Come! here's your health, my old comrade."

He tried to change the subject. But a moment later he himself led the conversation back to it again, and asked Sigismond, in an undertone, as if he were ashamed:

"Have you seen her?"

"Your wife? No, never."

"She hasn't written again?"

"No—never again."

"But you must have heard of her. What has she been doing these six months? Does she live with her parents?"

"No."

Risler turned pale.

He hoped that Sidonie would have returned to her

mother, that she would have worked, as he had worked, to forget and atone. He had often thought that he would arrange his life according to what he should learn of her when he should have the right to speak of her; and in one of those far-off visions of the future, which have the vagueness of a dream, he sometimes fancied himself living in exile with the Chèbes in an unknown land, where nothing would remind him of his past shame. It was not a definite plan, to be sure; but the thought lived in the depths of his mind like a hope, caused by the need that all human creatures feel of finding their lost happiness.

"Is she in Paris?" he asked, after a few moments' reflection.

"No. She went away three months ago. No one knows where she has gone."

Sigismond did not add that she had gone with her Cazaboni, whose name she now bore, that they were making the circuit of the provincial cities together, that her mother was in despair, never saw her, and heard of her only through Delobelle. Sigismond did not deem it his duty to mention all that, and after his last words he held his peace.

Risler, for his part, dared ask no further questions.

While they sat there, facing each other, both embarrassed by the long silence, the military band began to play under the trees in the garden. They played one of those Italian operatic overtures which seem to have been written expressly for public open-air resorts; the swiftly-flowing notes, as they rise into the air, blend with the call of the swallows and the silvery plash of the

fountain. The blaring brass brings out in bold relief the mild warmth of the closing hours of those summer days, so long and enervating in Paris; it seems as if one could hear nothing else. The distant rumbling of wheels, the cries of children playing, the footsteps of the promenaders are wafted away in those resonant, gushing, refreshing waves of melody, as useful to the people of Paris as the daily watering of their streets. On all sides the faded flowers, the trees white with dust, the faces made pale and wan by the heat, all the sorrows, all the miseries of a great city, sitting dreamily, with bowed head, on the benches in the garden, feel its comforting, refreshing influence. The air is stirred, renewed by those strains that traverse it, filling it with harmony.

Poor Risler felt as if the tension upon all his nerves were relaxed.

"A little music does one good," he said, with glistening eyes. "My heart is heavy, old fellow," he added, in a lower tone; "if you knew——"

They sat without speaking, their elbows resting on the window-sill, while their coffee was served.

Then the music ceased, the garden became deserted. The light that had loitered in the corners crept upward to the roofs, cast its last rays upon the highest window-panes, followed by the birds, the swallows, which saluted the close of day with a farewell chirp from the gutter where they were huddled together.

"Now, where shall we go?" said Planus, as they left the restaurant.

"Wherever you wish."

On the first floor of a building on the Rue Montpensier, close at hand, was a *café chantant*, where many people entered.

"Suppose we go in," said Planus, desirous of banishing his friend's melancholy at any cost, "the beer is excellent."

Risler assented to the suggestion; he had not tasted beer for six months.

It was a former restaurant transformed into a concert-hall. There were three large rooms, separated by gilded pillars, the partitions having been removed; the decoration was in the Moorish style, bright red, pale blue, with little crescents and turbans for ornament.

Although it was still early, the place was full; and even before entering one had a feeling of suffocation, simply from seeing the crowds of people sitting around the tables, and at the farther end, half-hidden by the rows of pillars, a group of white-robed women on a raised platform, in the heat and glare of the gas.

Our two friends had much difficulty in finding seats, and had to be content with a place behind a pillar whence they could see only half of the platform, then occupied by a superb person in black coat and yellow gloves, curled and waxed and oiled, who was singing in a vibrating voice:

Mes beaux lions aux crins dorés,
Du sang des troupeaux altérés,
Halte là!—Je fais *sentinelle !* [1]

[1] My proud lions with golden manes
Who thirst for the blood of my flocks,
Stand back !—I am on guard !

The audience—small tradesmen of the quarter with their wives and daughters—seemed highly enthusiastic: especially the women. He represented so perfectly the ideal of the shopkeeper imagination, that magnificent shepherd of the desert, who addressed lions with such an air of authority and tended his flocks in full evening dress. And so, despite their *bourgeois* bearing, their modest costumes and their expressionless shop-girl smiles, all those women, made up their little mouths to be caught by the hook of sentiment, and cast languishing glances upon the singer. It was truly comical to see that glance at the platform suddenly change and become contemptuous and fierce as it fell upon the husband, the poor husband tranquilly drinking a glass of beer opposite his wife: "You would never be capable of doing sentry duty in the very teeth of lions, and in a black coat too, and with yellow gloves!"

And the husband's eye seemed to reply:

"Ah! *dame*, yes, he's quite a dashing buck, that fellow."

Being decidedly indifferent to heroism of that stamp, Risler and Sigismond were drinking their beer without paying much attention to the music, when, at the end of the song, amid the applause and cries and uproar that followed it, Père Planus uttered an exclamation:

"Why, that is odd; one would say—but no, I'm not mistaken. It is he, it's Delobelle!"

It was, in fact, the illustrious actor, whom he had discovered in the front row near the platform. His gray head was turned partly away from them. He

was leaning carelessly against a pillar, hat in hand, in his grand make-up as leading man: dazzlingly white linen, hair curled with the tongs, black coat with a camellia in the buttonhole, like the ribbon of an order. He glanced at the crowd from time to time with a patronizing air: but his eyes were most frequently turned toward the platform, with encouraging little gestures and smiles and pretended applause, addressed to some one whom Père Planus could not see from his seat.

There was nothing very extraordinary in the presence of the illustrious Delobelle at a *café* concert, as he spent all his evenings away from home; and yet the old cashier felt vaguely disturbed, especially when he discovered in the same row a blue cape and a pair of steely eyes. It was Madame Dobson, the sentimental singing-teacher. The conjunction of those two faces amid the pipe-smoke and the confusion of the crowd, produced upon Sigismond the effect of two ghosts evoked by a bad dream. He was afraid for his friend, without knowing exactly why; and suddenly it occurred to him to take him away.

"Let us go, Risler. The heat here is enough to kill one."

Just as they rose—for Risler was no more desirous to stay than to go—the orchestra, consisting of a piano and several violins, began a peculiar refrain. There was a flutter of curiosity throughout the room, and cries of "Hush! hush! sit down!"

They were obliged to resume their seats. Risler, too, was beginning to be disturbed.

"I know that tune," he said to himself. "Where have I heard it?"

A thunder of applause and an exclamation from Planus made him raise his eyes.

"Come, come, let us go," said the cashier, trying to lead him away.

But it was too late.

Risler had already seen his wife come forward to the front of the stage and curtsey to the audience with a ballet-dancer's smile.

She wore a white gown, as on the night of the ball; but her whole costume was much less rich and shockingly immodest.

The dress was barely caught together at the shoulders; her hair floated in a blond mist low over her eyes, and around her neck was a necklace of pearls too large to be real, alternated with bits of tinsel. Delobelle was right: the Bohemian life was better suited to her. Her beauty had gained an indefinably reckless expression, which was its most characteristic feature, and made her a perfect type of the woman who has escaped from all restraint, placed herself at the mercy of every accident, and is descending stage by stage to the lowest depths of the Parisian hell, from which nothing is powerful enough to lift her and restore her to the pure air and the light.

And how perfectly at ease she seemed in her strolling life! With what self-possession she walked to the front of the stage! Ah! could she have seen the desperate, terrible glance fixed upon her down there in the hall, concealed behind a pillar, her smile would have lost

that equivocal placidity, her voice would have sought in vain those wheedling, languorous tones in which she warbled the only song Madame Dobson had ever been able to teach her:

Pauv' pitit Mamz'elle Zizi,
C'est l'amou, l'amou qui tourne
La tête à li.

Risler had risen, in spite of Planus's efforts.

"Sit down! sit down!" the people shouted.

The wretched man heard nothing. He was staring at his wife.

C'est l'amou, l'amou qui tourne
La tête à li,

Sidonie repeated affectedly.

For a moment he wondered whether he should not leap on the platform and kill her. Red flames shot before his eyes, and he was blinded with frenzy.

Then, suddenly, shame and disgust seized upon him and he rushed from the hall, overturning chairs and tables, pursued by the terror and imprecations of all those scandalized *bourgeois*.

CHAPTER XXIV

SIDONIE'S VENGEANCE

NEVER had Sigismond Planus returned home so late without giving his sister warning, during the twenty years and more that he had lived at Montrouge. Consequently Mademoiselle Planus was greatly worried. Living in community of ideas and of everything else with her brother, having but one mind for herself and for him, the old maid had felt for several months the rebound of all the cashier's anxiety and indignation; and the effect was still noticeable in her tendency to tremble and become agitated on slight provocation. At the slightest tardiness on Sigismond's part, she would think:

"Ah! *mon Dieu!* If only nothing has happened at the factory!"

That is the reason why on the evening in question, when the hens and chickens were all asleep on their perches, and the dinner had been removed untouched, Mademoiselle Planus was sitting in the little ground-floor living-room, waiting, in great agitation.

At last, about eleven o'clock, some one rang. A timid, melancholy ring, in no wise resembling Sigismond's vigorous pull.

"Is it you, Monsieur Planus?" queried the old lady from behind the door.

It was he; but he was not alone. A tall, bent old man accompanied him, and, as they entered, bade her good-evening in a slow, hesitating voice. Not till then did Mademoiselle Planus recognize Risler Aîné, whom she had not seen since the days of the New Year's calls, that is to say, some time before the dramas at the factory. She could hardly restrain an exclamation of pity; but the grave taciturnity of the two men told her that she must be silent.

"Mademoiselle Planus, my sister, you will put clean sheets on my bed. Our friend Risler does us the honor to pass the night with us."

The sister hastened away to prepare the bedroom with an almost affectionate zeal; for, as we know, beside "Monsieur Planus, my brother," Risler was the only man excepted from the general reprobation in which she enveloped the whole male sex.

Upon leaving the café concert, Sidonie's husband had had a moment of frantic excitement. He leaned on Planus's arm, every nerve in his body strained to the utmost. At that moment he had no thought of going to Montrouge to get the letter and the package.

"Leave me—go away," he said to Sigismond. "I must be alone."

But the other knew better than to abandon him thus to his despair. Unnoticed by Risler, he led him away from the factory, and as his affectionate heart suggested to the old cashier what he had best say to his friend,

he talked to him all the time of Frantz, his little Frantz whom he loved so dearly.

"That was genuine affection, genuine and trustworthy. No treachery to fear with such hearts as that!"

While they talked they left behind them the noisy streets of the centre of Paris. They walked along the quays, skirted the Jardin des Plantes, plunged into Faubourg Saint-Marceau. Risler followed where the other led. Sigismond's words did him so much good!

In due time they came to the Bièvre, bordered at that point with tanneries whose tall drying-houses with open sides were outlined in blue against the sky; and then the ill-defined plains of Montsouris, vast tracts of land scorched and stripped of vegetation by the fiery breath that Paris exhales around its daily toil, like a monstrous dragon, whose breath of flame and smoke suffers no vegetation within its range.

From Montsouris to the fortifications of Montrouge is but a step. When they had reached that point, Planus had no great difficulty in taking his friend home with him. He thought, and justly, that his tranquil fireside, the spectacle of a placid, fraternal, devoted affection, would give the wretched man's heart a sort of foretaste of the happiness that was in store for him with his brother Frantz. And, in truth, the charm of the little household began to work as soon as they arrived.

"Yes, yes, you are right, old fellow," said Risler, pacing the floor of the living-room, "I mustn't think of that woman any more. She's like a dead woman to me now. I have nobody left in the world but my little

Frantz; I don't know yet whether I shall send for him to come home, or go out and join him; the one thing that is certain is that we are going to stay together. Ah! I longed so to have a son! Now I have found one. I want no other. When I think that for a moment I had an idea of killing myself! Nonsense! it would make Madame What-d'ye-call-her, yonder, too happy. On the contrary, I mean to live—to live with my Frantz, and for him, and for nothing else."

"Bravo!" said Sigismond, "that's the way I like to hear you talk."

At that moment Mademoiselle Planus came to say that the room was ready.

Risler apologized for the trouble he was causing them.

"You are so comfortable, so happy here. Really, it's too bad to burden you with my melancholy."

"Ah! my old friend, you can arrange just such happiness as ours for yourself," said honest Sigismond with beaming face. "I have my sister, you have your brother. What do we lack?"

Risler smiled vaguely. He fancied himself already installed with Frantz in a quiet little quakerish house like that.

Decidedly, that was an excellent idea of Père Planus.

"Come to bed," he said triumphantly. "We'll go and show you your room."

Sigismond Planus's bedroom was on the ground floor, a large room simply but neatly furnished, with muslin curtains at the windows and the bed, and little squares of carpet on the polished floor, in front of the chairs. The dowager Madame Fromont herself could have

found nothing to say as to the orderly and cleanly aspect of the place. On a shelf or two against the wall were a few books: *Manual of Fishing, The Perfect Country Housewife, Barême's Book-keeping.* That was the whole of the intellectual equipment of the room.

Père Planus glanced proudly around. The glass of water was in its place on the walnut table, the box of razors on the dressing-case.

"You see, Risler. Here is everything you need. And if you should want anything else, the keys are in all the drawers—you have only to turn them. Just see what a beautiful view you get from here. It's a little dark just now, but when you wake up in the morning you'll see; it is magnificent."

He opened the widow. Great drops of rain were beginning to fall, and lightning flashes rending the darkness disclosed the long, silent line of the fortifications, with telegraph poles at intervals, or the frowning door of a casemate. Now and then the footsteps of a patrol making the rounds, the clash of muskets or swords, reminded them that they were within the military zone.

That was the outlook so vaunted by Planus—a melancholy outlook if ever there were one.

"And now good-night. Sleep well!"

But, as the old cashier was leaving the room, his friend called him back:

"Sigismond."

"Here!" said Sigismond, and he waited.

Risler blushed slightly and moved his lips like a man who is about to speak; then, with a mighty effort, he said:

"No, no—nothing. Good-night, old man."

In the dining-room the brother and sister talked together a long while in low tones. Planus described the terrible occurrence of the evening, the meeting with Sidonie; and you can imagine the "Oh! these women!" and "Oh! these men!" At last, when they had locked the little garden-door, Mademoiselle Planus went up to her room, and Sigismond made himself as comfortable as possible in a small cabinet adjoining.

About midnight the cashier was aroused by his sister calling him in a terrified whisper:

"Monsieur Planus, my brother?"

"What is it?"

"Did you hear?"

"No. What?"

"Oh! it was awful. Something like a deep sigh, but so loud and so sad! It came from the room below."

They listened. Without, the rain was falling in torrents, with the dreary rustling of leaves that makes the country seem so lonely.

"That is only the wind," said Planus.

"I am sure not. Hush! Listen!"

Amid the tumult of the storm, they heard a wailing sound, like a sob, in which a name was pronounced with difficulty:

"Frantz! Frantz!"

It was terrible and pitiful.

When Christ on the Cross sent up to heaven His despairing cry: *Eli, eli, lama sabachthani*, they who heard him must have felt the same species of superstitious terror that suddenly seized upon Mademoiselle Planus.

"I am afraid!" she whispered; "suppose you go and look——"

"No, no, we will let him alone. He is thinking of his brother. Poor fellow! It's the very thought of all others that will do him the most good."

And the old cashier went to sleep again.

The next morning he woke as usual when the drums beat the reveille in the fortifications; for the little family, surrounded by barracks, regulated its life by the military calls. The sister had already risen and was feeding the poultry. When she saw Sigismond she came to him in agitation.

"It is very strange," she said, "I hear nothing stirring in Monsieur Risler's room. But the window is wide open."

Sigismond, greatly surprised, went and knocked at his friend's door.

"Risler! Risler!"

He called in great anxiety:

"Risler, are you there? Are you asleep?"

There was no reply. He opened the door.

The room was cold. It was evident that the damp air had been blowing in all night through the open window. At the first glance at the bed, Sigismond thought: "He hasn't been in bed"—for the clothes were undisturbed and the condition of the room, even in the most trivial details, revealed an agitated vigil: the still smoking lamp, which he had neglected to extinguish, the carafe, drained to the last drop by the fever of sleeplessness; but the thing that filled the cashier with dismay was to find the bureau drawer wide open in which

he had carefully bestowed the letter and package entrusted to him by his friend.

The letter was no longer there. The package lay on the table, open, revealing a photograph of Sidonie at fifteen. With her high-necked frock, her rebellious hair parted over the forehead, and the embarrassed pose of an awkward girl, the little Chèbe of the old days, Mademoiselle Le Mire's apprentice, bore little resemblance to the Sidonie of to-day. And that was the reason why Risler had kept that photograph, as a souvenir, not of his wife, but of the "little one."

Sigismond was in great dismay.

"This is my fault," he said to himself. "I ought to have taken away the keys. But who would have supposed that he was still thinking of her? He had sworn so many times that that woman no longer existed for him."

At that moment Mademoiselle Planus entered the room with consternation written on her face.

"Monsieur Risler has gone!" she exclaimed.

"Gone? Why, wasn't the garden-gate locked?"

"He must have climbed over the wall. You can see his footprints."

They looked at each other, terrified beyond measure.

"It was the letter!" thought Planus.

Evidently that letter from his wife must have made some extraordinary revelation to Risler; and, in order not to disturb his hosts, he had made his escape noiselessly through the window, like a burglar. Why? With what aim in view?

"You will see, sister," said poor Planus, as he dressed

with all haste, "you will see that that hussy has played him still another trick." And when his sister tried to encourage him, he recurred to his favorite refrain:

"*I haf no gonfidence!*"

As soon as he was dressed, he darted out of the house.

Risler's footprints could be distinguished on the wet ground as far as the gate of the little garden. He must have gone before daylight, for the beds of vegetables and flowers were trampled down at random by deep footprints with long spaces between; there were marks of heels on the garden-wall and the mortar was crumbled slightly on top. The brother and sister went out on the road skirting the fortifications. There it was impossible to follow the footprints. They could tell nothing more than that Risler had gone in the direction of the Orléans road.

"After all," Mademoiselle Planus ventured to say, "we are very foolish to torment ourselves about him; perhaps he has simply gone back to the factory."

Sigismond shook his head. Ah! if he had said all that he thought!

"Return to the house, sister. I will go and see."

And with the old "*I haf no gonfidence*" he rushed away like a hurricane, his white mane standing even more erect than usual.

At that hour, on the road near the fortifications, was an endless procession of soldiers and market-gardeners, guard-mounting, officers' horses out for exercise, sutlers with their paraphernalia, all the bustle and activity that is seen in the morning in the neighborhood of forts. Planus was striding along amid the tumult,

when suddenly he stopped. At the foot of the bank, on the left, in front of a small, square building, with the inscription.

CITY OF PARIS,

ENTRANCE TO THE QUARRIES,

on the rough plaster, he saw a crowd assembled, and soldiers' and custom-house officers' uniforms, mingled with the shabby, dirty blouses of barracks-loafers. The old man instinctively approached. A customs officer, seated on the stone step below a round postern with iron bars, was talking with many gestures, as if he were acting out his narrative.

"He was where I am," he said. "He had hanged himself sitting, by pulling with all his strength on the rope! It's clear that he had made up his mind to die, for he had a razor in his pocket that he would have used in case the rope had broken."

A voice in the crowd exclaimed: "Poor devil!" Then another, a tremulous voice, choking with emotion, asked timidly:

"Is it quite certain that he's dead?"

Everybody looked at Planus and began to laugh.

"Well, here's a greenhorn," said the officer. "Don't I tell you that he was all blue this morning, when we cut him down to take him to the chasseurs' barracks!"

The barracks were not far away; and yet Sigismond Planus had the greatest difficulty in the world in dragging himself so far. In vain did he say to himself that suicides are of frequent occurrence in Paris, especially in

those regions; that not a day passes that a dead body is not found somewhere along that line of fortifications, as upon the shores of a tempestuous sea,—he could not escape the terrible presentiment that had oppressed his heart since early morning.

"Ah! you have come to see the man that hanged himself," said the quartermaster-sergeant at the door of the barracks. "See! there he is."

The body had been laid on a table supported by trestles in a sort of shed. A cavalry cloak that had been thrown over it covered it from head to foot, and fell in the shroud-like folds which all draperies assume that come in contact with the rigidity of death. A group of officers and several soldiers in duck trousers were looking on at a distance, whispering as if in a church; and an assistant-surgeon was writing a report of the death on a high window-ledge. To him Sigismond spoke.

"I should like very much to see him," he said softly.

"Go and look."

He walked to the table, hesitated a minute, then, summoning courage, uncovered a swollen face, a tall, motionless body in its rain-soaked garments.

"She has killed you at last, my old comrade!" murmured Planus, and fell on his knees, sobbing bitterly.

The officers had come forward, gazing curiously at the body, which was left uncovered.

"Look, surgeon," said one of them. "His hand is closed, as if he were holding something in it."

"That is true," the surgeon replied, drawing nearer. "That sometimes happens in the last convulsions.

You remember at Solferino, Commandant Bordy held his little daughter's miniature in his hand like that? We had much difficulty in taking it from him."

As he spoke he tried to open the poor, tightly-closed dead hand.

"Look!" said he, "it is a letter that he is holding so tight."

He was about to read it; but one of the officers took it from his hands and passed it to Sigismond, who was still kneeling.

"Here, Monsieur. Perhaps you will find in this some last wish to be carried out."

Sigismond Planus rose. As the light in the room was dim, he walked with faltering step to the window, and read, his eyes filled with tears:

"Well, yes, I love you, I love you, more than ever and forever! What is the use of struggling and fighting against fate? Our sin is stronger than we . . ."

It was the letter which Frantz had written to his sister-in-law a year before, and which Sidonie had sent to her husband on the day following their terrible scene, to revenge herself on him and his brother at the same time.

Risler could have survived his wife's treachery, but that of his brother had killed him.

When Sigismond understood, he was petrified with horror. He stood there, with the letter in his hand, gazing mechanically through the open window.

The clock struck six.

Yonder, over Paris, whose dull roar they could hear although they could not see the city, a cloud of smoke

arose, heavy and hot, moving slowly upward, with a fringe of red and black around its edges, like the powder-smoke on a field of battle. Little by little, steeples, white buildings, a gilded cupola, emerged from the mist, and burst forth in a splendid awakening. Then the thousands of tall factory chimneys, towering above that sea of clustered roofs, began with one accord to exhale their quivering vapor, with the energy of a steamer about to sail. Life was beginning anew. Forward, ye wheels of time! And so much the worse for him who lags behind!

Thereupon old Planus gave way to a terrible outburst of wrath.

"Ah! harlot—harlot!" he cried, shaking his fist; and no one could say whether he was addressing the woman or the city of Paris.

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